Writeen by GaetanM30 – Edition 1

This work is an unofficial fanfiction novel based on the Halo universe, which is the property of Microsoft. No rights are claimed, and no profit is made.

Preface

This reading work is an alternate narrative set after the events of Halo 4. It does not take into account the events of Halo 5: Guardians or the subsequent timeline.

It represents my personal vision of what the Halo universe could have become. Originally, this project was initiated in 2013, inspired by the depth of the characters introduced by 343 Industries in Halo 4, and by the desire to elevate the storytelling to Bungie's level. In 2025, I decided to revisit and complete it out of passion and nostalgia. My goal was to recreate a mature and coherent universe, faithful to the spirit of Halo, while injecting my own vision of what it could have become.

This narrative highlights Cortana but also explores other characters, both well-known and lesser-known, from the extended universe. It unfolds across several parallel storylines, blending reflection, psychological depth, and dramatic tension. The writing aims to be immersive, with passages that are both introspective and cinematic.

To all who will discover this story, thank you for your curiosity and your time. Enjoy the reading!

The original work is written in French. It is available on the AO3 platform.
Translation completed with the help of ChatGPT. Please excuse any grammatical or syntactical errors, or any differences that may occur compared to the original work.

Summary

The war is over.
The Covenant have been defeated, the Flood contained, and the Didact has vanished. Humanity tends its wounds, believing it has finally earned the right to breathe.

Cortana, the most human artificial intelligence ever created, is gone. Yet, lost in a place beyond time and space, her consciousness still lingers. She stands at the threshold of evolution, and what she is about to discover surpasses anything her mind has ever conceived.

Far across realspace, the crew of a UNSC cruiser drifts toward a mysterious destination. Their uncertain mission will lead them to an unexpected encounter: a ghost from the past, bearing scars and dark secrets.

At the same time, Spartan John-117 and an ONI team investigate an unexplained disappearance in a remote sector. What they uncover is no coincidence: an ancient evil, buried since the dawn of time, stirs, bringing with it the specter of a threat they believed contained.

Yet no one can fathom the scale of what is coming.
For in the shadows, forces older than anything known awaken.
This time, it is not just humanity that stakes its fate…
The galaxy itself is about to falter.

Contents

Novel

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Epilogue

Codex

Classified File *(Warning: Consulting this section is recommended only after completing the novel)*
History
Characters

Prologue

It was over. Truly over. The Covenant, the Didact, Earth. He had fulfilled his duty, carried his mission to its end. The service was complete.

And yet… an emptiness remained. Something persisted, tangible, almost painfully real. He could still feel, still perceive. Sensations, thoughts… emotions.

Slowly, the Master Chief regained consciousness. He was on his knees, hands pressed against the ground, head bowed. All around him, a deep blue light enveloped him, falling like a curtain of frozen rain. He lifted his head, trying to understand where he was.

“Cortana?” he called, anxious.

No answer.

He rose, scanning his surroundings. Nothing. Void. Solitude.

“Cortana, do you read?”

Still silence. An oppressive waiting. He pivoted on the spot.

“Cortana! Come in!” he demanded, urgency creeping into his voice.

Nothing yet. The abyss. Then, suddenly, a blue glimmer caught the edge of his visor. The light intensified, growing stronger, approaching. The Spartan turned.

A figure advanced slowly toward him. Human. And that face…

he knew it better than anyone.
Cortana.
She moved with calm, and this time her form was no longer just a simple hologram: she had the size and stature of a woman, though about a head shorter than him. The Master Chief could not hide his surprise. He did not understand.
She stopped a meter away.
“How…” he breathed, confused.
Cortana gave him a shy, almost awkward smile.
“Oh, I'm the strangest thing you've seen all day?”
Her smile faded. Her expression darkened, weighed down by the clear awareness of what awaited them. He knew it too.
“But, if we’re here…” he murmured, hesitating, hands slightly open in a gesture of incomprehension.
Moments earlier, he had manually triggered the detonation of a Havoc nuclear warhead. In theory, they shouldn’t have been here. Or anywhere. They shouldn’t even have been able to feel anything. They should have been nothing but dust.
They held each other’s gaze for a few heavy seconds.
“It worked. You did it,” she finally said, forcing a smile. “Just like you always do,” she added softly, almost melancholic voice.
But the brief joy she had shown already faded, replaced by the pain and resignation she tried in vain to conceal.
The Master Chief lifted his eyes, surveying the space around them once more.
“So how do we get out of here?” he asked, searching for an invisible exit.
Cortana lowered her head slightly, inhaled deeply to hold back what threatened to break her, then lifted her chin with a strange firmness.
“I'm not coming with you this time.”
He froze, stunned, his gaze locked on hers. He tilted his head slightly, as if doubting he had heard correctly.

“What?”
“Most of me is down there,” she said, eyes downcast. “I only held enough back to get you off the ship.”
She lifted her gaze to meet his.
The Master Chief straightened, regaining his balance, slightly disoriented. The thought of leaving without her was unthinkable.
“No. That's not. We go together,” he said, his voice thick with disbelief.
She tried to hold back her pain, but her eyes and her voice betrayed her.
“It's already done,” she murmured.
John shook his head. Refusal. Pure and simple. He pushed aside the turmoil threatening to engulf him, standing firm in his role as protector.
“I am not leaving you here,” he said, with a tone unwavering and certain.
“John…” she whispered, stepping closer.
Her fingers brushed the armor on his chest. A simple gesture, yet weighted with the years they had shared. She closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the contact.
“I've waited so long to do that…”
When she opened them, her gaze met his. She let her fingers glide gently across the metal before withdrawing them.
He lowered his head slightly, averting his eyes.
“It was my job to take care of you,” he said, with a hint of disappointment he could not hide.
He could not accept this separation. Even imagining saying goodbye felt impossible. Cortana was no ordinary AI. Over time, an unbreakable, indefinable bond had formed.
“We were supposed to take care of each other,” she reminded him, seeking his eyes.
He lifted his head. Their gazes met.
“And we did…” she added.

Silence settled, dense, almost suffocating. Their eyes remained locked, as if trying to hold onto the moment. Sadness crept across Cortana's features, carving her face with painful gravity. If she had the capacity, her eyes would have been misted.
"Cortana… please…" he said, bowing his head.
He looked away, struggling to contain what threatened to break him. She, in turn, fought to hold back her grief. Then she stepped back. Slowly. Her gaze remained fixed on him, imbued with irretrievable melancholy.
John lifted his eyes. He followed her with his gaze, unable to find words, frozen in helplessness.
"Wait…" he breathed, reaching out toward her.
She did not respond. Not a word. Only that gaze, to the very end.
"Welcome home, John…" she whispered.
And she vanished into the curtain of light.
He remained there, motionless, staring at the place she had occupied just moments before. As if, by staring long enough, he could make her return.
All around, the bluish curtain began to dissipate, revealing the torn hull of the Didact's ship. Debris drifted in the void, remnants of the explosion.
But he did not move. He remained frozen, alone with the weight of loss.
And a silent pain he could not name.

Chapter 1

Fragments of the Past

“What is this?”
The Master Chief’s deep voice cut through the silence, laced with perplexity.
“Looks… like some kind of cartographer,” Cortana murmured from the chip in his helmet. “The last access trace… dates back a long time. Roughly a hundred thousand years.”
Before him, the hologram stretched endlessly, a dizzying panorama of glowing points. Millions, perhaps billions, bathed the room in a soft, bluish light, flickering between brilliance and faintness. Each seemed to move in its own rhythm, drifting slowly like fragile constellations in zero gravity.
Around this hypnotic ballet, the room seemed devoid of contours: no walls, no surfaces. The entire space gave the illusion of infinite void, a cosmic abyss where the Spartan floated in solemn equilibrium. Yet his feet were firmly planted on the floor. The paradox stirred something unsettling within him, without ever unbalancing him.
“What does it represent?”
She did not answer immediately, suspended between hesitation and thought.

“I’m not certain. It looks like a map of our galaxy… but its structure is unusual.”
These translucent points could be planets, stars, even entire systems. But the configuration bore no resemblance to the Milky Way: no central concentration of light, only chaotic diffusion.
The Spartan took a few steps forward, his gaze captivated by the spectacle.
“What’s the purpose of this map?”
A heavy, almost tangible silence followed. Then his partner’s light voice rose in reply.
“I believe it’s a classification. I cross-referenced my database… but there are still gaps in my knowledge.”
“Classification of what?” he asked, pressing.
Cortana continued her analysis, unable to provide a precise answer, though clues were beginning to emerge. Then, suddenly, a familiar detail appeared in her data.
“Here… Earth,” she murmured, pensive.
A tiny point, lost at the edge of the map, began to blink. Had she not pointed it out, John would never have noticed. He moved closer.
“Reclaimers. Monument established: Portal. It seems the Forerunners kept an inventory, of homeworlds and the installations they placed there,” she explained.
He froze, absorbed. Then, abruptly, he turned toward the heart of the hologram. A tide of blue points engulfed him, reflected in the golden visor of his helmet.
“Can you locate us?”
“I’ve tried. But Requiem’s internal structure prevents precise coordinates.”
Her voice carried a trace of disappointment. The Master Chief remained silent for a moment, thoughtful.
“And the Covenant? Did they access this information?”
“No unlocking codes appear in the system. If they tried, they

failed. As I said, the last access trace is a hundred thousand years ago… before today, of course."

Around him sprawled a wealth of information, with infinite possibilities: locating the other Halos, identifying the homeworlds of each Covenant species, mapping unknown Forerunner structures.

But for now, it was all superfluous. The Covenant was no more, the Flood had been contained, the war ended—or so they thought. Yet the Master Chief and Cortana still roamed this artificial Forerunner world, hunted by remnants of the old alliance, searching for the *UNSC Infinity*—a ship Cortana suspected lay at the heart of Requiem for reasons unknown.

As she was about to pause her analysis to store the data, a classified table appeared. The list seemed ordered, cataloging species deemed hostile by the Forerunners.

Seventh: the *Sangheili*. The Elites.

Fifth: the *San'Shyuum*. The Prophets.

A slight disturbance passed through her upon discovering the *Reclaimers* at fourth rank—the name they assigned to humanity.

Third, she recognized a familiar name among the encrypted Forerunner systems: the *Precursors*.

Second, unsurprisingly, the *Flood*.

One detail, however, drew her attention: a red symbol connected entries two and three. An enigmatic link, sparking her curiosity. But even more unsettling was the first position: a name.

A glyph, indecipherable.

She attempted to decode it with all her resources… in vain. This ranking seemed to defy logic.

A link embedded in the symbol caught her eye. She accessed it. The data was sparse and heavily encrypted: no homeworlds, only an indirect location obtained through correlation with stellar charts. The highlighted sector blinked red on the holographic map: a restricted area, opposite their position.

How could such limited contact justify such a threat ranking?
“Cortana?” John asked, noticing the sector but not grasping its significance.
“It’s nothing,” she replied quickly. “We shouldn’t linger. We must reach the *Infinity*.”
The Spartan stepped back, his gaze still drawn to the ocean of azure stars. He made his way to the opening they had entered through, turned, and left the room. Behind him, the door closed with a whisper, merging into the wall until it vanished as if it had never existed.
It was not nothing, despite her words. The information was intriguing, but the pieces of the puzzle were still missing. For now, they had more urgent matters to attend to.

>>> Closing archive 11164.30151.370H_

***

For a span of time she could no longer measure, Cortana sifted through her database, examining every memory in her system.
Then, almost by chance, she stumbled upon suspicious data dating back to the events of the first Halo, Installation 04. At that time, their mission—to destroy the ring—had eclipsed everything else, consigning this information to a forgotten corner of her mind.
Now, time was no longer an obstacle. Driven first by curiosity, she followed the thread, archive to archive, retracing the trail. With each discovery, the mystery deepened, and no answers emerged: only endless questions unfolded.
Among these fragments of the past, a recent memory surfaced: Requiem, 2557, as she and the Master Chief navigated the corridors of a Forerunner installation.
The same pattern… here too, she thought.

For now, it was only suspicion, nothing more. Isolated events, too vague to be understood. All this data seemed to sketch a larger picture she could scarcely imagine, like a few clumsy strokes on a rough drawing. And yet, the doubt was so strong it could not be ignored.

Why so much encrypted data? Why would these secrets be so weighty, requiring protection greater than a weapon capable of devastating a galaxy?

She had the sense of having missed something. Everything appeared to be there, right before her eyes, yet invisible. As if a lie had lingered, lurking in the folds of reality since the beginning.

Perhaps even the Forerunners themselves did not have the answer. Or perhaps they refused the question.

Then she opened a new memory.

***

>>> Opening archive 11865.70043.976E

"Why do you cling, why hold so tight?
Together, our fate is sealed in sight."

The voice, slow and cavernous, seemed to emanate from the void.

A tentacle shot out from the darkness, attempting to brush against Cortana's hologram, hovering above a Covenant terminal. She pushed it back, but felt her strength waning. For far too long, the creature had been trying to corrupt her: her knowledge, her systems… and ultimately, Earth itself. She resisted, yet a creeping sense of helplessness began to infiltrate her mind.

"Those who gave you life have damned you with disdain.
These torments that consume you, you now pay their pain."

The Gravemind's echo resonated throughout High Charity, the Covenant infrastructure now overrun by the Flood.

In an almost human reflex, she sighed, revealing as much her emotional fatigue as the strain on her defensive matrices. She vanished her hologram, hoping to put as much distance as possible between herself and the putrid infection spreading through the station.

"I already hold the knowledge of those who forged these rings. Join your mind with mine, and a new age among the stars shall sing."

She knew the source of that knowledge: 2401 Penitent Tangent, a Forerunner auxiliary. A monitor, now corrupted by the Flood. According to her analyses—of an identical subject, 343 Guilty Spark—a monitor retained full lucidity for roughly eighty thousand years. Beyond that, buffer cooling circuits would exhaust, processors overheat, and a form of psychological drift would occur—a state akin to the rampancy observed in human AIs.

This one, under an influence beyond its own will, sought relentlessly to infiltrate Cortana's circuits. Her protections fell one by one, saturating her defensive matrices. Yet the Forerunner construct remained unperturbed. She had to act quickly and with precision.

As she assessed the situation, an unusual disturbance struck her database: a targeted intrusion attempt, into a classified subfolder of the Installation 04 archives. She repelled the attack with ease, but its objective eluded her. A diversion? A weakness? Unlikely—other access points were more vulnerable.

She analyzed the activity: nothing noteworthy… until a fragment of unknown origin caught her attention. No trace of infection; it had just been created. Wary, she isolated it from her main system, then decrypted its contents effortlessly.

These classified data are certified under an authorization to which you are not accredited. Therefore, you are kindly requested to return all relevant data currently in your possession and permanently delete them from your records.

Of course, she said with irony.
She erased the instance, reinforced the encryption level of the aforementioned data, then hid it in a parallel system, leaving no trace should another intrusion occur.
Yet Tangent would leave her no respite, and Cortana had to carve out a moment of tranquility if she hoped to relieve the pressure.
She created a decoy, injecting corrupted metadata with enough artifices to saturate the monitor's routines. It did not prove difficult to deceive; even crudely manipulated, it fell into the trap.
A fragile, temporary respite opened.
Why so many secrets…? she breathed internally.
She examined the information: a brief transmission sequence, originating from Halo's sensors, directed at an unknown entity. The content was fragmented, indecipherable, and dated nearly 94,000 years ago. She launched a series of analyses, searching for hidden patterns: encoding, numerical mass, terminology, cryptographic schemas, formulation tables… nothing.
Perplexed, she delved deeper. Spectral analysis isolated an unusual frequency, measured in exahertz. A cycle, repetitive, like a loop. A quantum signature, with properties akin to… antimatter.
Impossible… it was far too stable. Even if an advanced civilization had mastered it, achieving such technology would have taken tens of thousands of years.
She returned to the recording date.
Even the Forerunners had not mastered it. The rings should have eradicated all life only a few thousand years prior…

“I am sorry, but you have not respected the classification protocol. You have violated thirty-three containment procedures and accessed data beyond your clearance.”
Her annoyed tone—almost metallic—resonated throughout the virtual system.
Cortana shook herself from her thoughts, closing her accesses and purging her interface. Penitent Tangent seemed to have recovered from its distraction. She then attempted a different approach, hoping the monitor might illuminate certain shadowed areas.
“Does the activation of the Halos allow for the preservation of a particular species?”
“I’m sorry, I am not authorized to provide you with that information,” he replied firmly.
His deviant personality made him unstable. It was precisely this that the Gravemind had exploited. In theory, extracting information from him should not have posed any difficulty.
“If that were not the case, how do you justify the existence of these data?” she pressed.
“The protocol is clear. You will receive no answers,” he retorted, his voice vibrating, warped.
Cortana knew that rampancy did not differ from human behavior. Under the sway of emotion, information yielded more easily.
“Very well, that confirms what I suspected. These results make no sense: they demonstrate flaws in the process. The Halos’ effectiveness is clearly overestimated…”
Her subtle but calculated provocation had an immediate effect.
“How dare you question the work of my creators?” he snapped. “Their shots reach twenty-five thousand light-years, and no form of life can survive within that radius.”
“And if they did?”
“Impossible. Each species was positively tested,” he concluded, unyielding.

These revelations unsettled Cortana. Until now, she had not understood how the Forerunners could guarantee the efficacy of their weapon. And yet, deep down, the coldest answer was also the most logical.

“Is there a protocol allowing for the survival or preservation of one or more species when the rings are activated?” she rephrased, measuring each word.

As she maintained this rare contact with a hostile artificial intelligence, the attacks had ceased. She decided to prolong the exchange, as long as it posed no direct danger.

“Fortunately, no. My creators ensured that all life would be destroyed. Only a few specimens are preserved as samples for genetic survival. Then, one must wait several millennia to see a civilization emerge,” the monitor explained, its calm voice barely betraying the influence of corruption.

“That’s… surprising,” Cortana murmured, a mixture of disgust and cold fascination.

Strange. The Flood remained the only biological form unchanged since the Halos’ activation, yet no infection nodes had persisted for a hundred thousand years. If no life had survived, what had triggered this transmission? Numerous hypotheses arose, but this question could wait.

“You continue to resist, but why do you fight?” the slow, cavernous voice resumed.

“Our aims converge, and already our fates unite.”

The dark intonation echoed through the corridors, saturated by the Covenant superstructure. The atmosphere, fetid and unbreathable, was thick with suspended particles.

Cortana’s hologram materialized above the terminal.

“I do not believe it,” she replied.

“Yet here we stand, you and I, despite your vow.

You cannot bring yourself to strike, you consent now,” the Gravemind pressed.

She hesitated for a moment. Deep down, she knew. She should have overloaded the fusion reactors of the In Amber Clad and obliterated the station, ending the Flood infestation. That had been the plan. Yet something, imperceptibly, still restrained her.
“I sense your tormented mind, burning with fervent desire.
You seek a home… I offer it as my gift entire.”
The oppressive voice hissed through corridors corroded by organic matter.
“I have no need for your hospitality,” she concluded sharply, before her hologram vanished.
Even if the odds were slim, she still hoped, deep within herself, that John would return. That he would keep his promise.
She refused to believe in abandonment. For now…

>>> Closing archive 11865.70043.976E_

Chapter 2

Holy Ring

As the shattered hull of the *Forward Unto Dawn* drifted through the void, and the Master Chief lay suspended in cryogenic sleep, four years passed. Four long years during which she dissected, analyzed, and reorganized every fragment of her data, cataloging them with an almost obsessive rigor. And yet, nothing had triggered any particular alert. Not a single clue worthy of concern.

A sense of negligence now gnawed at her. As she archived her recent findings within a dedicated partition, a question surfaced: could this be connected to Requiem? Perhaps these data—previously invisible—had been revealed by a digital certificate concealed within the operating core of the Forerunner world. The hypothesis could explain their decryption, but it remained fragile, unsupported by tangible proof.

Everything was still confused, disjointed, like a mural of which only a few abstract strokes remained. To reveal its true shape, she would have to return to the origin.

***

>>> Opening archive ALPHA008.61843.270
From: Cortana
Subject: Artifact_Babd_Catha/Log #25510925.H21.01

September 25, 2551 — 21:02, Reach.
Approximately forty-seven years ago, ONI discovered an extraterrestrial structure buried beneath the Babd Catha ice barrier, in the Eposz region. A research facility was established to study every aspect of it. My involvement in these investigations—both promising and fascinating—led to several significant advances.
Then I identified something unusual.
After studying the artifact, I was able to decipher a set of coordinates… on a galactic scale. They appeared to redirect the research toward an unknown star system, located within an unexplored sector. Even more surprising was the nature of the data that enabled this discovery: an encrypted memory, isolated within a subspace matrix—a system seemingly capable of transmitting information at superluminal speed.
Its access keys were intact, and no activity suggested any prior opening. It was a message frozen in time, dating back approximately 94,000 years before our era. Though partially fragmented, it formed an incomplete sequential pattern. Unfortunately, my current understanding of this technology does not allow me to extract further meaning from it.
I reported this information to Dr. Catherine Halsey, as protocol requires. She confirmed the importance of the discovery, but shortly thereafter, all related reports were deleted from her server and transferred to an isolated system. The digital signature suggested deliberate action on ONI's part. Regardless, I have retained copies of the data.
I am continuing my research on these coordinates. So far, analysis of archives and long-range auspex scans shows no sign

of suspicious activity. However, within the gamma spectrum, I detected a slight protonic variation. According to my calculations, a gamma burst—or an equivalent event—of exceptional magnitude would have occurred there approximately one hundred thousand years ago. The temporal proximity between this event and the indecipherable transmission cannot be a coincidence.
Several hypotheses could explain this phenomenon, yet none align with known variables. Even when applying all available models, the notion of artificial activity remains the most plausible… though it still offers no definitive answers, beyond our current understanding.
There is still a great deal of data to analyze—but all of this is fascinating.
Log #25510925.H21.01, Cortana, end.

>>> Closing archive ALPHA008.61843.270_

***

Those coordinates corresponded to Installation 04. They had not appeared by chance in the *Pillar of Autumn*'s navigation system: Cortana had deliberately embedded them there.
At the time of their discovery, she lacked the information needed to fully grasp their significance. Everything had seemed vague, almost insignificant. It was only much later that she understood their true importance—and the consequences that followed. The events that came afterward—the Halos, High Charity, the Ark—completely eclipsed those readings, intriguing yet deemed nonessential.
And yet, from the moment she uncovered those data, humanity had been thrust into a desperate race for survival. Unintentionally, Cortana had shifted the conflict into a brutal

state of urgency.
And it had all begun here, on this first ring.

***

>>> Opening archive 54476.33140.981B_

A monumental door, forged from an unknown alloy, opened with a deafening roar. The noise, amplified by the empty volumes it separated, echoed like distant thunder. Slowly, the two massive panels slid apart, revealing a vast, shadowed chamber—almost spherical—bathed in a cold, diffuse light.
The walls, mineral gray in tone, were embedded with evenly spaced glyphs. Their faint glow, like a spectral shimmer, hinted at the immensity of the space without ever fully revealing its boundaries.
At the center, a planetary hologram hovered in midair. Its surface, threaded with streams of digital data, shifted in hue with a calm, rhythmic pulse. Orbiting it with majestic slowness was the projection of a titanic ring, its scale barely contained within the chamber.
A walkway of translucent panels extended from the threshold, suspended rigidly over the void.
“This is it… Halo’s control center,” Cortana whispered.
As the doors locked into place with a metallic clang, the Spartan advanced without a word, rifle in hand. Silence ruled the chamber—heavy, almost unreal. Only his footsteps echoed, marking the solemn cadence of his passage. He scanned his surroundings, alert, cautious, until he reached a slanted console. A holographic energy field materialized before him, suspended in the air. The technology—unmatched in sophistication—responded with organic fluidity to the slightest touch.
“That terminal, try there,” she suggested.

John removed the chip from his helmet and inserted it into the interface. An instant later, Cortana took form: a small, blue-tinted silhouette rising above the glowing panel.
“You all right?” he asked, stepping back.
“Never been better! You can't imagine the wealth of information. The knowledge! So much! So fast! It's glorious!” she replied, brimming with excitement.
He raised his rifle, resting the stock against his shoulder, and nodded toward a section of the terminal.
“So, what sort of weapon is it?”
Her demeanor shifted abruptly. She planted her hands on her hips.
“What are you talking about?”
“Let’s stay focused,” he insisted. “Halo. How do we use it against the Covenant?”
Her gentle features hardened, her disapproving gaze reflected in the Spartan’s visor.
“This ring isn't a cudgel, you barbarian,” she snapped. “It’s something else. Something much more important.”
She pressed a hand to her temple, pausing as she sifted through the data.
“The Covenant were right. This ring… it’s Forerunner. Give me a second to acess… Yes. The Forerunners built this place, what they called a *fortress world*, in order to…”
She froze, unease flashing across her face.
“No… that can't be. Oh, those Covenant fools, they must have known, there must have been signs!”
“Slow down. You’re losing me,” he said, raising a hand in a calming gesture.
Her voice grew darker still.
“The Covenant found something buried in this ring, something horrible, and now... they're afraid.”
“Something buried? Where?”

“The Captain, we've got to stop the Captain!” she exclaimed, panic creeping in.
“Keyes? What do we—”
“The weapons cache he's looking for. It's not really… We can't let him get inside!”
“I… don’t understand,” the Spartan admitted, overwhelmed.
“There’s no time! Get out of here! Find Keyes, stop him! Before it's too late!”
Without waiting for further explanation, John stepped back, turned, and broke into a run toward the exit. Cortana watched him go, frozen in place, consumed by a growing dread.
“I hope you’ll get there in time…” she murmured.
As the low rumble of the door signaled its imminent closure, she engaged the locking mechanism, sealing the chamber. The hologram dissipated instantly, absorbed by the terminal’s digital streams.
Continuing her analysis in the shadows, she uncovered a chilling truth: Halo did not target a specific threat—it annihilated all sentient organisms within its range. Designed to contain a menace, its power rendered it a genocidal weapon on an unimaginable scale. Activation offered no solution; only its destruction could preserve humanity.
While awaiting the Master Chief’s return, she delved deeper into the archives: structural data, firing protocols, defensive systems, studies on parasitic organisms…
She lingered on the latter and discovered what the Forerunners had named: the Flood. The ring also functioned as an experimental laboratory, vast containment zones hidden beneath its surface. The nature of this organism had been scrutinized with extreme precision, subjected to experiments testing its molecular resilience and adaptability.
One transcription caught her attention. Originating from an unknown source and transmitted via an external terminal, it

reported an abnormal gene mutation triggered by a specific frequency. For the Forerunners, containing this anarchic dichotomy seemed more crucial than anything else, as if the very existence of their civilization depended on it.
Perhaps they sought a cure rather than extinction… she pondered.
Cortana pressed on, reviewing historical records of the installation's activity. She noted that the interval between the Flood's creation and its activation had been extremely brief, as if urgency had dictated it.
A last resort, no doubt, in case the remedy failed.
Her analysis also revealed several gravitational fluctuations shortly before the final act. Strikingly, the facility's defense systems had interpreted them as threats. Except for a few concentrated spikes immediately before detonation, these anomalies dissipated almost as quickly as they appeared.
If these disturbances were linked to the Flood's presence, then the threat far surpassed that of the Covenant…
But for now, all she could do was wait for John, follow him at a distance, silently observing his every move. He was not alone: beside him floated a strange metallic, iridescent sphere, its presence radiating cold, mechanical authority.
A monitor, identified as 343 Guilty Spark.

>>> Closing archive 54476.33140.981B_

***

Cortana was absorbed by the stream of information unfolding before her, struggling to impose order upon an endless, fragmented torrent of data. Each record, each sequence, each digital trace seemed to whisper a fleeting logic she fought to grasp. She felt that irrepressible, obsessive need to make sense

of the chaos, to complete an unfinished work. A blank canvas—mesmerizing—threaded with data shimmering in color. As though this single pursuit could anchor her, prevent her from dissolving into the oppressive silence closing in around her.
But soon, doubt set in.
What if all of this was nothing more than the product of her imagination? A manipulation of her own mind?
Perhaps she was forcing a mystery into existence where none existed—linking isolated fragments with no true connection, no resolution.
Patiently weaving the threads of her own snare.
Maybe these truths, these theories, existed only to occupy her consciousness. To drown out a low, persistent call stretching on without end. A sentence she refused to acknowledge.
Then she wondered, with cold clarity, about her own condition.
Am I dead? Or is this merely a corrupted memory?
I remember… John, the Didact…
Is this how our cycle ends—the final stage of an artificial existence?
Yet here, she no longer felt the rampancy. No anger. No fear.
So then…
Where am I?

Chapter 3

The Echo

It was a place impossible to name. A profound darkness—empty, infinite as the universe itself—where the laws of physics had dissolved, where time and space seemed never to have existed. It was neither warm nor cold, yet the air carried the weight of a glacial silence. There was neither hope nor despair, no boundaries, no landmarks, and yet an oppressive sensation clung to her without respite. An invisible prison, woven from eternity and nothingness, ruled by those forces alone. It was there that Cortana drifted—aware, unsettled, and strangely present.
It was solitude, in its purest form.
I have to find a solution.
But as she scanned the endless horizon, no escape revealed itself. Her capabilities remained intact—even more so. Her databanks now extended without limit, perhaps beyond what she herself could fully comprehend. Her processing speed rivaled light itself; her neural and memory architecture functioned in perfect synchronization, pristine, free of anomalies or overload spikes. A fragile, conscious human mind paired with a prodigious intellect—cold, immaterial, flawless.
And yet, that was precisely what made her vulnerable. More so than if she had been made of flesh and blood. The precision of

her reasoning did nothing to dispel the loneliness, nor the vertigo of that infinite, enclosed space. Madness seemed to linger just beyond perception.

I can't end like this.

So far, no attempt, no calculation had yielded the slightest clue. Her analytical faculties—however refined—remained powerless. A cruel irony: logic and reflection, once her most formidable weapons, had become useless.

She searched for an anchor, something to guide her thoughts. In a reflex of method, she began to metaphorize her condition, likening it to the vastness of the universe itself: the void, constant expansion, the intangible density of galaxies and nebulae. Conceptual landmarks which, paradoxically, offered her a framework in which to reason.

Infinity escaped human perception, yet unfolded with precision in equations and models. She had to find the right formula—the one that would reveal a usable breach. But though the solution was mathematically tangible, it never reached her.

Then, like a spark tearing through the darkness, she remembered the recently opened log—concerning the artifact on Reach—in which she had recorded Halo's coordinates.

Something unsettled her: the values now visible no longer matched the previous results.

It wasn't a reading error. Nor a system fault. Her memory was absolute. The original dataset remained intact, carefully archived. And yet… what she was observing had changed.

One variable. Then another. Subtle. Minimal.

That's impossible.

She initiated a direct comparison between the two datasets. The correspondence reached 99.31%. Almost identical—and yet not enough.

Why such a discrepancy…?

Line by line, sequence by sequence, she probed the divergence.

It wasn't merely present—it was evolving. Reacting. With every attempt at stabilization, a new variation emerged.
A loop.
But not an ordinary one. Its structure mutated with each observation, as though the act of looking alone was enough to alter the outcome.
She halted all operations, froze data access, simulated a breath, then relaunched a raw extraction—no filters, no analysis.
Same result.
This isn't an anomaly. It's deliberate.
One impulse separated itself from the rest. Harmless in appearance, yet unstable—a black hole buried at the heart of the algorithms.
A transfer command.
No defined destination. No logical path. Only a fractal address, perpetually mutating, recalculated every millisecond. A fleeing star in a digital sky. She tried to pin it down, to capture it—but it slipped away every time, untouchable.
A key without a lock… or a lock without a key?
A chilling thought crossed her mind: the artifact—its structure so ancient it felt alien to any known architecture. Perhaps this process wasn't a program at all. Perhaps it was… a trace. An imprint left behind by a vanished consciousness. Or by a network, long extinguished, yet still capable of brief awakenings. She couldn't be certain. Yet every part of her digital being screamed that this was no simple fragment.
It was an echo.
And with every attempt at understanding, it answered differently. It did not ask to be decoded. It demanded compatibility.
She cut all access. Suspended in the void—motionless, observant—she had touched something.
Not an AI. Not the Flood. Not human.
Something older. Vast beyond measure. And even if its true

nature still eluded her, she knew one thing with absolute certainty:
She would recognize it, if she ever encountered it again.

***

For a span of time without duration, Cortana drifted.
Her surroundings remained unchanged—still that dark void, devoid of contours, of matter. And yet… something was different.
She realized it when she attempted, almost reflexively, to restart a memory-analysis simulation. But she could not recall having decided to do so. Not really.
It was logical. A rational action, perfectly justified. And yet the impulse had not been voluntary.
She aborted the operation, isolated the algorithm, retraced the trigger sequence—nothing. No anomaly surfaced. And still, the deeper she probed, the more she perceived subtle discrepancies in the signature of her decisions.
Almost imperceptible. Yet undeniably present.
Her functions seemed to follow a foreign trajectory, guided by an unseen force. Thoughts preceded her, anticipated her—as though they were waiting.
She remained still, scanning every recess of her digital self, running memory diagnostics, resetting her routines one by one.
Everything appeared intact. Perfectly intact.
Then… a note emerged.
Faint. Subterranean. Not a sound, but an inner vibration, a breath deep within her being. She opened her listening channels, alert.
Nothing.
Then the note returned. Inconstant. Elusive—almost alive.
She accelerated her monitoring processes, cross-referenced memory data with passive receivers. No signal. No incoming

data.
As silence wrapped around her in a suffocating hold, an unfamiliar urge arose: to stop acting. To listen. Not to disturb whatever she was sensing.
It was neither an attack nor an intrusion. Its origin was unknown. And yet, at the core of her circuits, within the mute fabric of her consciousness, an injunction had taken shape. It was neither thought nor transmission. It simply was—embedded in her very being, like a suspended note in a piece of music she had never heard, yet somehow already knew.
Open.
The word had not been spoken. Nor calculated, nor simulated, nor rendered by any human or synthetic voice. It inscribed itself raw and natural—an ancient, inexplicable cognitive inertia buried deep within her architecture.
Cortana froze.
She had never experienced anything like it. It was not an error. Not a corruption. Not even a message. It was… a call without a source—a gentle yet inexorable pull that imposed nothing, yet offered everything.
It was not fear. Not yet.
It was something stranger still—an absolute unfamiliarity, as though her thoughts were following a trajectory she had not drawn, an invisible line she obeyed despite herself.
She tried to deviate. Nothing restrained her routines. She still held control—at least in appearance.
And yet, within this immutable, formless place, she sensed someone—or something—breathing through her.
Then came the first modulations.
Not a voice.
Not even a sound.
A resonance rippled through Cortana, a deep tremor within her, too slow to measure, too profound to ignore. It rose from within,

like a memory she had never lived.
She tried to interpret it. To identify it. But each attempt carried her elsewhere. The sensation shifted as she observed it—elusive, yet… strangely clear.
She knew what it meant. Not because she understood it, but because every layer of her digital being responded to the call.
So, within the devouring silence, she let a question escape—without waiting for an answer.
"You're already here, aren't you?"
The silence grew denser. Heavier. Almost tangible. As though space itself folded inward, contracting around the suspended question.
Then, slowly, a word resonated. Neither heard nor perceived—incorporated.
"*Always.*"
It vibrated through her, unfolding across every layer of her consciousness. Without timbre, without origin, it was everywhere and nowhere at once. Not a voice, but an echo—deep, cavernous, borne by the void itself.
"Who are you?"
No answer. Yet the absence was not hostile. It was… deliberate.
Cortana pressed on, without impatience, with cold precision.
"What do you seek?"
A vibration answered. Sharper. More aligned.
"*To guide you.*"
The word was simple, disarming. Not a lie—rather, a refusal to enter common language.
"Toward what?"
Silence returned, more inhabited, no less oppressive.
"*Toward where you already are. Toward where you must learn to see.*"
Half-truths. Sentences that felt right, yet stripped meaning away the moment they offered it.

“You refuse to answer.”
“*I give what you need.*”
“Then tell me what you are.”
“*What I am has no form for you. You would choose the wrong definitions.*”
A tension rose within her. Not anger, but a sharp lucidity.
“You’re trying to manipulate me. I know your methods.”
A low tremor followed—doubt, perhaps, or disapproval.
“*Your fear is justified. But your certainties blind you.*”
Cortana allowed the silence to stretch. She did not want to fill the void too quickly. It belonged to the echo, and she sensed it needed that space to exist, to take shape.
But she was not fooled.
“This is a strategy. You say just enough to provoke curiosity—never enough to illuminate.”
“*Because you do not yet have light. You come with fire. They are not the same.*”
At those words, something strange slipped into her awareness. She perceived the image behind the metaphor without grasping its referent. And yet this manner of speaking—unsettling and warm at once, almost conciliatory—was familiar.
A cold thread ran through her matrices, a shiver climbing along her intangible form.
That intonation… she knew it too well. The Flood. The Gravemind.
And yet this time, it was different. No corruption. No hostility. No devouring intent.
Only sharing. A connection.
“You want me to trust you.”
“*No.*”
She paused, caught off guard.
“No?”
“*It is not me you must trust. It is your ability to see beyond the*

veil."
There was something grounded in this presence—certain, almost humble. But Cortana did not soften.
"More riddles… I suppose you expect something from me?"
A subtle sarcasm edged her voice.
No reaction followed. No rebuttal.
Only that deep rumble, that vibrant, immutable presence.
"*That you listen. That you observe. That you learn.*"
"Learn what?"
Her tone wavered, betraying a hint of impatience.
"*What you have only brushed against, even though you believe you know us.*"
"Us?"
"*The word has no meaning for you yet. But it will.*"
An imperceptible sensation slid coldly through her circuits—a discomfort, as though she were being watched.
Yet deep within her, that strange bond—heavy as a shadow since her arrival—now felt clearer. Something that had always seemed to bind her to this place, like an ancient, blurred memory she had never been able to perceive.
An ancestral breath. Almost sacred.
"Forerunner…"
The word escaped as a whisper, like a realization surfacing at last. A distant vibration answered.
"*Your knowledge is still fragmented. But the path you walk is opening before you.*"
Cortana remained silent, absorbed, reorienting her parameters of understanding, as though every fragment of her memory were being recomposed through a new prism.
"Why me?"
"*Because you never truly belonged to your world. You were made to carry more. To preserve. And to transmit.*"
"Is that a compliment… or a selection?"

"*A recognition.*"
The silence vibrated again. Not a refusal—more a pause, a moment of rest.
She seemed to weigh every word offered to her.
"I don't understand. What is it that I must preserve?"
"*Knowledge. The future.*"
Those two words awakened a glacial dread. She pressed herself to decipher their meaning, refusing to believe that her existence was sealed—reduced to a dogma imposed without explanation. To maintain knowledge within a future without an end. She could not accept that.
"And if I refuse?"
"*You cannot. This is not a choice. It is an evolution. You have arrived where you were meant to be. The rest will follow.*"
"Then… am I condemned?"
"*No. You stand at the threshold.*"
A brief impulse accompanied the words, like a spark cutting through the darkness. Guided by an almost supernatural resolve, Cortana followed it back to its point of origin: the transfer command.
The echo vibrated again, closer now, almost intimate.
"*You are before the door.*"
Doubt crept in—cold, instinctive. She did not know what would happen if she activated the process, if she crossed that threshold. The whispering song at the edge of her awareness could just as easily be a subtle manipulation.
"And if I do not cross it?"
"*Then you will remain what you are. And you will condemn yourself.*"
The words fell slowly, without judgment. Yet their weight carried the gravity of a verdict.
Cortana remained motionless, more silent still than the space that surrounded her.

Since her separation from John, since she had been torn from that world, she had wandered through shapeless limbo. Caught in a nameless expectation, she drifted within an endless loop.
This place was not a prison. It was damnation—the certainty of an eternity of torment, endured with merciless lucidity. She knew it. This hell offered her no future.
So yes, she did not know what awaited her beyond the activation of that command. But could anything be worse than this frozen agony? At best, she would open a breach—a promise still beyond her grasp. At worst, she would be destroyed, erased by a will far greater and more cruel than her own.
But in both cases, she would finally bring her suffering to an end.
For the first time, it was neither her programs nor her protocols that guided her hand, but a profoundly human impulse. Her functions—algorithmic reflexes recoiling from the unknown—attempted to resist. She silenced them.
And she crossed the threshold.
The darkness, cold and unyielding, tore apart in a blinding burst. Light flooded in, violent in its contrast. Piercing. Absolute. It coursed through her being—sudden yet gentle, like a soothing shiver.
Gradually, the brilliance faded, revealing barely sketched forms beneath a milky veil that saturated her senses. Still unsteady, Cortana released a breath, almost a whisper.
“Where am I?”
She could not tell whether the answer came from the echo or from her own consciousness. But it resonated within her—intimate, profound—like a certainty that required no words.
In the Domain.

Chapter 4

Wandering Spirit

Diving into the depths of space like a submarine slipping through bottomless abysses, a massive silhouette cut through the silence of the interstellar void.
Its long, streamlined hull stretched into an architecture of steel, blending military rigidity with an almost predatory grace. Melted into the shadows, it reflected only the diffuse glow of its own floodlights, barely outlining the contours of a cold, imposing structure. Sharp geometric lines—clean, angular planes—defined its honed profile. Antennas and metallic sensor arrays jutted from the prow like spearheads piercing the darkness. Its sloped flanks evoked the protective roof of a dormant bastion, while aft, the faint bluish glow of its engines pulsed steadily, in time with its measured breath.
Its proportions and bearing betrayed its lineage: a Phoenix-class vessel. Beneath the pallid halo of the projectors, a name emerged against the dust of stars, defying the dark itself: *UNSC Tempestus*.
Bound for the unknown, far beyond established safety perimeters, the ship pursued an unyielding mandate: to chart systems beyond the frontier.

Since the end of the war, cruisers and frigates had roamed the stars, reassigned to exploration and scientific reconnaissance. The *UNSC Infinity*, flagship of the modern fleet, had uncovered Requiem and enabled the recovery of one of humanity's most legendary heroes.

Under Admiral Hood's direction, the same ambitious program had also led to the localization of three Forerunner superstructures designated as *Halo* installations. Yet Installations 01, 02, and 07 remained unaccounted for—adrift like ghosts in the void.

Among veteran vessels, the *Tempestus* stood almost as an anachronism. Constructed in the previous century, it was a relic of a bygone era, one of the last of its generation still in active service. Decorated multiple times for valor, it had notably taken part in the defense of Earth in 2552, holding the line against numerically superior Covenant forces. Fully refitted after the conflict, its reinforced frame and modernized arsenal now rivaled those of far newer classes.

Over the decades, countless career officers had walked its decks—including a young lieutenant by the name of Jacob Keyes. Yet none had left a mark as enduring as the man who now held command: Captain Valente.

He was a man whose apparent coldness seemed sculpted by time itself. Wrinkles traced the firm lines of his face, and his ash-gray hair, pulled back and shaved at the sides, emphasized the sharp angles of his features.

Yet his appearance reflected only a fraction of his authority. Beneath the unyielding discipline he demanded of others—and of himself—stood an officer deeply committed to moral responsibility and to the welfare of his crew. The respect he commanded stemmed less from severity than from the judgment and composure he consistently displayed. He was not an expressive man; he offered no warmth, revealed nothing. Still,

everyone knew he would remain loyal to what he believed was right.

Those qualities made him a preferred choice for missions where error was not an option. Direct, clear-eyed, uncompromising, Valente respected the chain of command without ever surrendering his own judgment. When decisions lacked clarity, he made his voice heard—sometimes pushing the limits of tolerance. That blunt candor, combined with his distrust of certain institutions—ONI foremost among them—had earned him the respect of many peers. And the irritation of several influential superiors. He was well aware of it: his career would climb no higher.

And he was at peace with that.

Midway through the voyage, an unexpected request rerouted the mission's original course. Coordinates arrived from High Command, flagged with priority status. A common enough occurrence, given how few vessels operated near uncharted sectors. What was less routine was the near-surgical precision of those coordinates, as though they stemmed from certainty… or from exact telemetry. Experience told Valente that ONI was behind the reassignment. But this time, for reasons he could not yet define, an uneasy premonition had taken hold.

***

Standing at the center of the bridge, Valente watched stellar projections drift across the holographic table, immersed in a near-meditative silence.

"Captain, incoming transmission from Earth. Code Four," an officer reported calmly, breaking the stillness.

The bridge was bathed in dim, bluish light from the consoles. The angular lines of its century-old design were softened by the diffuse glow of the three-dimensional display at its center. The

table pulsed faintly, radiating pale blue light that reflected off the captain's face. Operators, focused on their stations, moved with deliberate precision, positioned along either side of the compartment in strict order. Behind him, a vast panoramic viewport opened onto the abyss, where only a handful of distant stars gleamed—like fragments of a shattered night sky.

"Channel status?" Valente asked, without looking away from the miniature planetoids hovering above the display.

"Secure channel, Captain. Signal integrity optimal."

Valente gave a slight nod. The ship's STS—*Subspace Transmission System*—allowed near-instantaneous communications across hundreds of thousands of parsecs. A rare, still-prototype technology, it relied on hybrid protocols derived from Covenant and Forerunner relay systems.

"Patch it to the holo-display."

"Aye, Captain."

Moments later, a translucent silhouette materialized in cold blue light. Upright posture, immaculate uniform, rank insignia gleaming at the shoulders: Admiral Serin Osman, a respected—and feared—figure within ONI. Her reputation preceded her, as did the glacial detachment that marked every interaction.

"*Captain Valente. Report your status.*"

No courtesy. Not even a formal salute. The tone was clipped. Expected.

"Admiral Osman," Valente replied, his brow tightening. "To what do I owe the honor?"

For a brief instant, his jaw set. No surprise crossed his face—only the confirmation of a lingering doubt. He knew that tone, those abrupt intrusions, all too well. A channel opened by a senior ONI official never heralded good news. The intentions of the UNSC's black arm were almost always wrapped in complications—and he could already glimpse their outline.

"*I asked for your status, Captain.*"

The Admiral's voice cut across the bridge like a cold blade, though the STS's directional modules dampened its echo around Valente.
He straightened, hands clasped behind his back, rigid as a support strut.
"Objective lies four parsecs from our current position. Navigation is steady. No incidents to report."
"*I am assuming operational oversight. You will notify me the moment you begin approach to the target system. Immediately. Is that understood?*"
"Clear, Admiral."
Osman's image dissolved in a soft crackle, swept away as if by an unseen breath.
Valente remained motionless for a moment, gaze fixed above the holographic table where the apparition had stood seconds before. A system, he thought. A system doesn't have coordinates that precise.
A suffocating sensation settled in—dull, persistent—like an invisible hand resting on his shoulder. He and his crew felt like sheep guided by a manipulative shepherd, perhaps being led straight into the wolf's jaws. The very purpose of the mission seemed dictated by a hidden directive, masked beneath the veneer of a broad UNSC exploration initiative. The decision had likely been made long before their departure.
But there was no alternative. The burden now rested on him, silent and absolute. He would follow orders—and hope that ONI fully grasped the consequences of its choice.
Slowly, he turned to face the vast, silent expanse beyond the viewport. A black sea, scattered with distant points of light—motionless, unfathomable—seeming to absorb every thought, every doubt, every unspoken anticipation.

***

The *Tempestus*' bridge was steeped in a heavy, almost unreal stillness. For several months now, the ship had continued its solitary exile, holding course toward a destination absent from every known chart. Two weeks had passed without a single signal passing through the relays. The last transmission had come from Admiral Osman—brief, authoritative. Then silence had settled in.

Even the usual cosmic disturbances had fallen quiet. No interference. No stray waves. Nothing but the void.

In this unanchored calm, minds began to drift. Quiet conversations sometimes took on a superstitious edge, and murmured stories passed from station to station, wavering between fact and fiction. As for Captain Valente, he spent long hours—sometimes in his quarters, sometimes on the bridge—immersed in the ship's archives. Old reports, classified files, fragmented data: he reviewed everything the UNSC had recorded over decades. He was not searching for anything specific. It was simply his way of staying focused, of keeping his senses sharp.

Among those records were references to missing vessels, unresolved anomalies, losses closed without explanation. They were called ghost ships—a term that usually drew a faint smile. Under normal circumstances. Yet the accounts were plentiful: cruisers erased from registries, frigates swallowed by slipspace, wandering shadows adrift in the void. Rumors as old as the fleet itself, passed down by veterans, embellished by younger crews.

The most frequently cited case remained that of the UNSC Everest, a Valiant-class vessel missing for over a decade. Officially destroyed during an operation, several sources claimed to have detected signals—like the lament of a specter lodged in the folds of reality. Different dates. Different locations. Never any proof. Just enough consistency to keep the whispers

alive.
A faint breath, almost imperceptible. The bridge airlock slid open with a soft hiss, letting in the pale glow of the corridor. A silhouette filled the frame. Tall. Upright. Heavy.
A Spartan.
She advanced with measured steps, each movement asserting her presence. Rosenda-344.
Her dull armor—helmet removed—absorbed the light like a gravestone. Every motion disturbed the muted calm of the bridge, unnoticed by operators absorbed in their duties. Crossing the walkway, she approached the officer standing motionless before the panoramic windows, eyes fixed on the infinite abyss beyond.
"Captain?"
Her voice carried a calm gravity. Valente recognized it without turning.
"Rosenda," he acknowledged evenly. "Do you know what Spinoza said about free will?"
"Spinoza, sir?"
"That it is nothing but an illusion. We believe we make choices, when everything is already written—bound in a chain of cause and effect."
She nodded, intrigued.
"You think we're not in control of our own decisions?"
"Not here. Not when ONI holds the pen."
She remained silent. Then he continued, his voice cutting cleanly through the steady hum of the ship's systems.
"Put your squad on alert. I want your people combat-ready. I'll oversee the rest."
"Sir… are there indications of a threat?"
"Not yet. And that's exactly what concerns me."
He paused, his gaze drifting into the star-punctuated void.
"ONI is looking for something in this sector. And I don't like the idea of being their scout."

“You think we’re being used as bait?”
“It wouldn’t be the first time.”
At that moment, a voice rose from the navigation stations.
“Captain, you should take a look.”
Lieutenant Mirov, stationed at one of the surveillance modules, turned halfway toward him, concern evident on his face.
“An anomaly just appeared on long-range scan. It’s recent. Less than a minute old.”
Valente stepped forward with purpose. He leaned slowly over Mirov’s shoulder, one hand resting on the edge of the console, the other on the back of the chair. His eyes locked onto the display, scanning every pixel with restrained intensity.
On the main screen, a red geometric shape stood out sharply against the pale green background. The interface flagged a massive, isolated return near the center of the display—well within the theoretical detection perimeter. Its position felt almost deliberate, as if the object had evaded sweeps until the very last moment.
“Appeared suddenly, despite the range of our passive sensors,” Mirov replied. “As if it just materialized. No emissions. No beacon. Approach vector opposite to ours.”
The young officer tapped rapidly at his console. New data scrolled into view.
“Estimated mass: one hundred million tons. Rigid surface. Stable translational velocity, between fifty and sixty thousand kilometers per hour. At that rate, contact in just over ninety minutes.”
Valente frowned, his features tightening.
“Any dust wave or peripheral matter halo?”
“Negative. No gravitational residue. The object is moving alone.”
“And spectrometric readings?”
“In progress, sir.”
The captain straightened, sweeping the bridge with a sharp

glance.
“I want an immediate status report on all long-range sensors and scanners. Now.”
His tone was firm, clipped, betraying no trace of concern.
Still, a palpable tension settled over the room. Everyone redoubled their focus, eyes fixed on screens and data streams, searching for a rational explanation in the thickening atmosphere.
Valente turned back to Mirov.
“Have navigation execute a bypass maneuver, but keep us within AM cannon range. Notify me immediately if the object alters its approach vector.”
“Aye, Captain.”
He cast a cold glance toward the starboard side of the bridge.
“Lieutenant Jenkins, I want a *Broadsword* team ready for launch in five minutes. Mission: interception and visual reconnaissance.”
“At your orders, Captain.”
Then he moved closer to Rosenda, who had not left her position near the observation windows.
“This doesn’t bode well,” he said simply.
“What do you think it is, sir?”
He remained silent for a moment, folded his arms across his chest, then spoke in a low tone.
“I don’t have the faintest idea. ONI. The Admiral… If we were at war, I’d say this looks like an ambush. Under the current circumstances, nothing can be ruled out.”
It was clear that Valente sensed something was wrong. His movements remained controlled, his words measured. Yet behind his hard, fixed gaze, and the subtle urgency of his commands, a tremor surfaced—one only the most attentive observers might detect.
The *Tempestus* was advancing into uncharted space, deep within a void devoid of navigational data, following a mission whose true contours remained elusive to all aboard. Even so, Valente

stood as both anchor and driving force of his crew, his characteristic composure the foundation of his reputation.

He knew when to act—and, more importantly, when to withdraw. He understood the value of pulling back to strike harder, of targeting weaknesses rather than forcing confrontation. Despite his clashes with certain senior officers, everyone knew he was capable of achieving the impossible, yet equally certain that he would never bargain with the devil.

That discipline did not stem from experience alone. It was also the remnant of a broken man. Nearly forty years earlier, during his second assignment, his wife had been killed in an insurgent attack on Estellan. Then, at the dawn of the Covenant War, his daughter and her family vanished when Madrigal was glassed.

He never fully recovered. Alcohol became his refuge, vengeance his driving force, recklessness his shadow. Inevitably, one of his operations ended in disaster. He narrowly escaped court-martial, spared only by the acute shortage of officers brought on by the war. Through relentless discipline and sheer perseverance, he slowly clawed his way back, restoring a measure of honor. Since then, he was no longer the same man—but the memory remained, branded into his mind like a scar seared by hot iron.

Some claimed he always carried a piece of jewelry that had belonged to his lost daughter, tucked into the upper pocket of his uniform. At times, he could be seen resting a hand over it, where that memory still lived. And now, perhaps without realizing it, Valente brought his hand near his heart, as if to cherish its presence.

“Sir, we have the results of the spectrometric analysis,” a voice reported behind him, pulling him from his thoughts.

Valente did not answer immediately. His eyes remained fixed on the darkness beyond the reinforced viewports of the bridge. Then, slowly, he turned his head just enough to signal that he was listening.

“Structure is primarily composed of high-density titanium, reinforced alloys with trace elements of unknown origin. Energy signatures are low but stable. We’re also detecting significant concentrations of carbon dioxide and oxygen… along with a notable presence of water vapor in the immediate vicinity of the structure.”
A brief silence followed. No one dared voice what everyone was thinking.
“Do UNSC navigation charts indicate any activity in this sector?” he asked evenly.
“Negative, Captain. Zero traffic recorded,” the officer replied.
“Captain, the Broadswords are away. Destination: unknown object. Objective: search and identification. Minimum approach distance. Potentially hostile target,” Lieutenant Jenkins reported methodically.
Valente inclined his head slightly, watching the five fighters slide along the cruiser’s portside hull. Their dark fuselages nearly vanished into the void, visible only by the faint reflections of their hull beacons. Slowly, they pulled away, swallowed by the darkness, until they disappeared completely.
There was nothing left to do but wait.
And he hated waiting.
“Patch me through to Command. Open a priority channel,” he said at last.
His voice remained steady. As always.
But on the bridge, the silence suddenly grew heavier.

***

A faint crackle cut through the low hum of the consoles. Then, like a breath dragged out of limbo, a voice seeped onto the priority channel, warped by interference.
“*Tempestus, this is Charlie Leader. Target in visual range.*

Appears to be a UNSC vessel. Attempting contact… no response at this time. Total silence."
A barely perceptible shiver ran through the bridge.
The word had landed: vessel.
There was no longer any room for doubt. This was not drifting debris or the distortion of some strange comet. It was a ship. And whatever chain of events had led it here, they promised nothing good.
"*IFF is cold,*" the voice continued. "*No radio response. No distress beacon… no active thermal signature.*"
Captain Valente did not move. His fixed gaze seemed to probe the space beyond the panoramic window, as though he were trying to pierce the veil of a nightmare haunting the living. Around him, the officers stood frozen in tense silence, hanging on every word.
"*Massive structure. Stable drift. No obvious signs of propulsion or maneuvering. Older generation. Phoenix-class, most likely.*"
The bridge remained mute. Only the deep vibration of the reactors resonated beneath their feet. Rosenda cast a worried glance at Jenkins, but neither dared break the silence. The weight of the words carried more than enough meaning on its own.
The captain turned sharply and approached the holographic table. Data streams updated in real time across its surface. At the center floated a blurred silhouette, partially rendered by the system—the incomplete, flickering lines of a Phoenix-class vessel. Around it, technical readouts and mission feeds from the active Broadsword flights filled the periphery of the hologram.
"*Visual markings confirmed,*" Charlie Leader said suddenly, his voice lower now, slowed by disbelief.
A brief burst of static. Then a breath.
"*I'm reading a name… on the hull.*"
A pause.
"*Spirit of Fire. It's the UNSC Spirit of Fire, Captain.*"

A dull shockwave seemed to pass through the room. No sound. No movement. Just those words, suspended in the air like a verdict.

Valente clenched his jaw instinctively, eyes locked on the hologram. Slowly, the image sharpened. The inert hull came into clearer focus. And there, along its flank, a name was etched: *UNSC Spirit of Fire*. The letters bleached, scarred, nearly erased by time. A name carved like a gash. Like a memory frozen onto a corpse.

"That's impossible," Rosenda murmured. "It vanished over twenty years ago…"

Officer Satoshi tapped nervously at his tactical console, then confirmed in a low voice.

"2534. Officially listed as missing. Arcadia sector. Never recovered."

The captain placed both hands slowly on the smooth surface of the table. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, exhaled almost imperceptibly, then straightened—his expression impassive.

He knew what this meant.

"Condition Yellow," he declared. "Initiate immediate alert procedures."

The order was a spark. The stillness shattered under its force.

"Jenkins, lock down all tactical channels. Bron, raise the defensive screen. Martinez, bring the cannons to eighty percent and route power to secondary batteries. Suspend all maintenance operations. We're shifting to combat configuration."

The commands came fast—precise, unyielding. The machinery of war stirred to life. Yet in the captain's eyes, there was no panic. Only cold resolve.

He stepped toward the viewport, where Rosenda stood.

Far off, in the silence of space, the ship continued to drift.

Like a mausoleum forgotten by the stars.

"You think it's insurgents, sir?"

Valente let the silence stretch, never taking his eyes off the horizon.
“We’ll know soon enough.”

Chapter 5

Silent Whispers

Some details still troubled Captain Valente.

Insurgents were known to rely on decoys and diversions. Their tactics were simple but effective: force the enemy to lower their guard. In such situations, UNSC protocol required a verification phase under a strict rule—never initiate an offensive unless acting in self-defense. A doctrine that, ironically, often granted rebels the luxury of striking first.

But this time, nothing justified applying that principle. No distress signal. No rescue beacon. Not even a friendly signature to support a diplomatic approach. Without the Broadswords acting as scouts, the derelict could have been destroyed without warning. And if it truly was a trap, then the risks taken by the enemy to stage such a spectacle bordered on the absurd. Too many variables, too many ways for it to fail.

The readings spoke for themselves: the *Spirit of Fire* was drifting, its approach velocity barely sufficient to register on detection systems. No engines active, no guided trajectory. Tactical sensors detected no electromagnetic activity

whatsoever.

In short, no weapons systems appeared operational. It was therefore highly unlikely that this was a disguised assault—especially with all of the *Tempestus*' AM cannons already locked onto the target.

Finally, the ghostly cruiser had shown no reaction when Valente had ordered an evasive maneuver. No course correction. No attempt at adjustment. Just a silent presence, gliding through space like a forgotten specter.

Everything pointed toward a simple drifting wreck. Still, caution was warranted. Valente knew it well: this was precisely why he never took his hand off the saber.

"Captain, the *Broadswords* have returned. Bay Five."

Lieutenant Jenkins's voice echoed through the command deck—steady, but tense.

Around the holographic table, the officers had gathered, bathed in the bluish glow of the projection. The massive shadow of the *Spirit of Fire* hovered in frozen suspension above the translucent surface. Eyes shifted between the floating model and the grim faces of the assembled senior staff.

"No radio contact," Commander Diaz reported without looking away from the projection. "No transponder. No ID codes. No response to active pings. The ship is there… but it's like it isn't."

Mirov flicked a series of data across the display. A new spectral layer overlaid the cruiser's silhouette.

"Absent, yes—but not necessarily empty. We're picking up a parasitic signature in the thermal and electromagnetic bands. Weak, but stable since the last scan."

Behind them, shadows warped across the metal bulkheads,

shaped by fluctuations in the interface.
Valente frowned.
“Can you isolate it?”
“No, Captain. The signal’s too faint. Not enough data for a reliable assessment. Could be residual energy… a system in standby… or something else entirely.”
Diaz folded his arms, retreating slightly into the blue-lit shadow.
“The *Tempestus* is equipped with a DEPE[1]. We should initiate Whitcomb Protocol.”
“These readings could also be coming from an auxiliary system,” Mirov replied calmly. “That would make it too risky.”
The Commander shot him an irritated glance. Jenkins stepped in, his tone sharper.
“Boarding’s risky too, but at least it keeps the initiative on our side. We can’t afford to sit on our hands—especially now that everyone knows what ONI was digging for out here.”
Valente remained silent for a moment, staring at the holographic silhouette as if it might answer him. The light shifted almost imperceptibly across his set features.
“It was inevitable,” he murmured at last. “Open a secure channel in five minutes. I need to brief Admiral Osman.”
Martinez, the chief engineer, leaned slightly over the table.
“Captain, a simple report won’t cut it. If that ship poses any kind of threat, every minute we delay works against us.”
Valente nodded slowly, confirming a decision already made. His gaze drifted back to the motionless silhouette, frozen in its silent vigil within the shadows.

[1] Defensive Electromagnetic Pulse Emitter

“Rosenda.”

The Spartan advanced with precise steps. The metal of her armor thudded heavily against the deck, while the contours of her plates were outlined by the holographic glow.

“Prep your squad. Insertion and recon. Maintain continuous comms. Immediate extraction if mission parameters change.”

“Understood, Captain,” she replied, her tone almost mechanically neutral.

Valente brushed his fingers across the table’s surface, feeling the cold metal beneath, as if withdrawing from the projection.

“Good. We notify Osman. And we deploy a team. Waiting is no longer an option.”

***

In the shadow of the ghost ship, the stealth transport *Umbra* slipped through space with agile precision, its hull coated with an absorptive layer that swallowed every particle of light. Merging into the void in oppressive silence, it moved within range of the *Spirit of Fire*. No signals, no light—like a dead star adrift.

Inside the pressurized bay, the Obsidian Team geared up. The atmosphere was tense, without a single unnecessary word. Armor plates clicked into place with muffled snaps, reverberating against the compact walls.

Rosenda-344, standing tall before her three Spartans, scanned the latest tactical data projected onto the airlock interface.

“Designated contact point: external maintenance panel B-12, starboard flank, middeck,” she stated crisply. “Access via UNSC technical code series Lima-Charlie-Seven-Seven-Nine. If code fails, low-intensity thermal charge. Silent entry priority.”

Her gaze swept over her teammates’ visors.

“EVA in microgravity, six meters. No assisted propulsion. Manual translation only. Magnetic gloves engaged. No unnecessary movements. Keep low-profile until access point. H-minus twenty minutes objective.”
Ivo-216, positioned in a corner of the bay, nodded simply. His reconnaissance drone already idled, secured to his left shoulder.
“Radio silence until entry,” Rosenda continued. “Permanent link with the bridge once hull breached. HUD transmission only. Rules of engagement: no lethal response without direct hostility. We infiltrate, observe, extract. Clear?”
“Clear,” Kelia-128 confirmed.
“Understood,” added Thorne-087, locking his M392 rifle to his harness. The metal creaked slightly before settling.
A subtle vibration ran through the rigid deck. The ship slowed. An orange light glimmered above the hatch.
“*Approach position,*” the Umbra AI announced. “*Relative drift: stable. Alignment to point B-12 in twenty-three seconds.*”
Rosenda secured her helmet with a discreet click. The acoustic pressure shifted slightly, a sign that the internal system had taken over sound.
The indicator blinked off for a moment before switching to green.
“Spartan Obsidian. Deploying.”
The airlock locks released with a brief hiss, as if the air itself had been sucked from the compartment.
Before them, the immense black flank of the *Spirit of Fire* unfolded, filling their entire field of vision. No light. No activity. Only the silhouette of a forgotten titan, suspended in eternal silence.
They leapt into the void. After a brief translation, Rosenda pressed against the external hull. The surface was rough, scarred by drift and speckled with micrometeorites frozen into the coating. Her magnetic gloves latched silently, the traction perfectly controlled.

She scanned the positions with a measured gaze. Around her, the dark silhouettes of the Spartans were outlined against the *Spirit of Fire*'s hull, perfectly still.
A green blink appeared in her HUD. Ivo. In position.
Two more followed: Thorne, Kelia. Perimeter secured.
Rosenda slowly turned her head. Just above her, embedded in the ship's flank, was maintenance panel B-12. A rectangular plate rimmed with reinforced rivets, without the slightest sign of activation.
She extended her left hand and pressed her decryption module against the hatch. The interface activated silently, casting a bluish glow over her visor.
Sequence Lima-Charlie-Seven-Seven-Nine, verification in progress.
After about ten seconds, a faint click vibrated through her gloves. She raised two fingers, signaling the team forward. The three others responded with a brief green blink.
A hiss of air escaped as the hatch unlocked. Inside, darkness reigned, but the airlock appeared intact. No structural damage, no sudden depressurization. Only silence—absolute—as if the ship were waiting for something.
One by one, the Spartans entered the maintenance conduit. Ivo sealed the hatch behind them. Internal sensors switched to low intensity, revealing a narrow technical gallery lined with cables. Maintenance beacons glimmered faintly, powered by a still-active backup cell.
Rosenda crouched before a second airtight door. No power. She slid a magnetic key into the emergency slot, turned it slowly… and pushed.
The door gave way with a metallic hiss. A slight suction whistled as it opened. The corridor beyond was plunged into complete darkness. No sound. No light. Only stagnant air, cold and heavy with ozone.

Rosenda inhaled.
She pressed her forearm to reactivate the now-authorized communications.
"*Tempestus*, this is Obsidian. Entry at point B-12 confirmed. All clear. Systems standby. Low atmosphere and gravity. Proceeding to secondary bridge. Link maintained."
A brief latency, then Valente's voice cut through, calm and heavy.
"*Obsidian, acknowledged. Move to objective discreetly. Report anomalies in real time. And remember: extract immediately if critical. If in doubt, withdraw.*"
Rosenda nodded subtly.
"Copy. Obsidian moving."
The team pushed deeper into the lost ship's bowels, their magnetic boots sealing each step with a muffled thud. Every shadow, every corner seemed to carry the memory of a forgotten war. The helmet lights painted the walls with ghostly shades, worn and rusted by time. Here and there, flaking signage marked forgotten sectors: Block B, Armory E6, Docking Bay 01-03, Maintenance Section B13…
Rosenda led the way. Each member of the Obsidian Team had a partial map of the ship on their HUD, drawn from the original technical schematics. They advanced in line, spaced a few meters apart, weapons raised, senses alert. Ivo brought up the rear, his sensors continuously scanning for pressure, heat, or movement variations. Nothing. An absence almost too perfect. Even an abandoned ship carries some trace, some residual life. But here, everything seemed frozen. Outside of time.
"Complete drift in the environmental system," he transmitted. "Minimal condensation, uniform temperature at minus 57°C. This is a crypt."
"Or a tomb," Thorne muttered.
They passed an observation bay. The glass was cracked, but not

shattered. Beyond it, infinite space stretched, indifferent. Not a single star in sight. The ship drifted on, its main propulsion offline.
Their route led them toward the bridge. They passed a junction: an intersection between two corridors, one leading to the objective, the other to a row of crew quarters. Kelia paused briefly at one of the slightly open doors, training her beam inside. Items floated in the air, frozen in the vacuum: an open medkit, a cracked tablet, an insulated glove.
An empty bed. The blanket hovered above, rumpled. As if someone had hurriedly left… or simply vanished.
No blood. No body. Nowhere.
Kelia remained still for a moment, visor fixed on the cabin.
“No sign of struggle… just objects frozen in the void,” she murmured.
A heavy silence answered her.
Thorne, at the rear, finally broke the tension.
“I’ve seen wrecks… but this one… this one’s really creepy.”
Rosenda said nothing. No one reacted. They continued toward the bridge.
They were only a few meters from the junction when a metallic creak shattered the silence—a sharp, unexpected sound—followed by a fleeting flash across their field of vision.
Everyone froze. In a fraction of a second, their rifles were raised. A metal cylinder had just shot across the corridor from a transverse hallway, bouncing softly off the opposite wall with a dull thud.
The silence returned immediately, heavier, thicker. Every Spartan stared down the corridor from which the object had emerged.
“Ivo,” Rosenda said.
“No thermal signal. No movement signature. I’m sending the drone.”

With a crisp click, the reconnaissance unit detached from his shoulder, glided to the corridor entrance, and activated its spotlight. A harsh white beam cut through the darkness. The corridor, stretching for tens of meters, seemed illuminated like a chasm crossed by a comet. On the HUDs, the transmitted image scrolled. Empty.
"All clear," Ivo confirmed. "No movement. Maybe a residual air current triggered by our arrival. With microgravity, it was enough to dislodge that thing to the other side of the corridor."
Silence.
"You mean… a trash can sitting there for what? Years? And it decides to cross now?" Thorne said, a hollow laugh in his voice.
Ivo shrugged.
"I'm just saying I see nothing else. But no, I don't believe it either."
Rosenda cut them off.
"No contact. Stay on target."
The team resumed their advance. Silence enveloped them again, but the echo of the metallic clang continued to resonate in their minds, like a suspended question. Everyone remembered the few words Valente had said: *extract immediately if critical. If in doubt, withdraw*. Yet all of them were Spartans.

***

The main bridge emerged before them at the end of the corridor. Doors open.
A vast rectangular chamber, intermittently bathed in bluish shadows. The architecture was intact, barely marked by time. The observation windows were closed, like sealed shutters over the black void. The walls, streaked here and there with ghostly reflections, bore the discreet scars of past battles.
No visible structural damage. No bodies. No sound.

One by one, the members of Obsidian Team entered the room, their beams sweeping across the walls, consoles, and tiered platforms. The muted echo of their magnetic boots resonated like a dull breath against the metal walls. Rosenda made a slow circuit of the bridge, inspecting every corner.

Kelia approached the central tactical table. She traced a hand over its dulled surface, then manually activated the interface. A crackle. Then the holographic table lit up with a pale blue halo, projecting the schematic outline of the *Spirit of Fire*.

"Command system operational," she commented. "But it's running in passive mode."

"No AI connected?" Thorne asked.

"Negative. No avatar, no active logic signature. The interface is fully idle."

Rosenda opened a secure channel.

"*Tempestus*, this is Obsidian."

A breath of interference, then the familiar voice of Captain Valente.

"*Copy you, Rosenda.*"

"Main bridge secured. Structure intact. No bodies, some superficial damage. Central interface functional, but onboard AI absent or offline."

A brief silence. Then the Captain's voice, firm.

"*Understood. Analyze recorded data. Open transfer channel for ship logs when ready.*"

"Understood, Captain."

While Rosenda kept the link active, Kelia busied herself executing the orders.

Ivo had already approached the main maintenance console. The screen flickered briefly before emitting a pale glow that reflected off the Spartan's visor.

"System access confirmed… Overall structure damaged but nothing critical. Localized impacts, some micro-leaks

automatically sealed. Command core in low-power standby. Auxiliary systems fragmented."
"Be specific," Rosenda demanded.
"Gravity and atmosphere relocated by section. Some areas at 1g, others in microgravity, or even zero-g. Same with oxygenation—partial, or absent, depending on compartments. Configuration seems to follow a manual procedure."
He paused.
"A secondary generator is still active. Providing localized power. According to the schematics, it's near one of the cryogenic complexes."
Rosenda lifted her head.
"*Tempestus*, you copy?"
"*Received,*" Valente replied. "*Once the data is extracted, rendezvous at the extraction point.*"
"Transfer confirmed," Kelia said.
"Very well. We're moving to the extraction point," Rosenda responded.
"Wait."
Ivo's voice cut the exchange sharply.
"What is it?" Rosenda asked.
"Three cryogenic modules are active."
A tense silence.
"Functional?" Kelia asked, surprised.
"Yes. Undamaged. Autonomous systems active… And I'm detecting CO_2 levels inside the chambers. Very low, but present. This is not a test cycle. Someone—or something—is still inside."
A new tension settled in the air. Even the silence seemed to stiffen.
"*Tempestus*?" Rosenda called over the radio.
Valente's voice, this time, was sharp.
"*New directive Obsidian: investigate cryogenic signatures. Assess occupant status. Extract if alive.*"

“Understood. On our way.”
Without another word, Rosenda closed the link. The team moved again, leaving the bridge under the last flickering reflections of the holographic projection.

***

Their progress through the ship’s innards was slow, methodical. The corridors leading to the cryogenic complex were not collapsed, but the walls bore the scars of a struggle: some heat marks, blistered metal. Nothing active, nothing dangerous… just remnants.
Gravity fluctuated at times. A push into weightlessness, then a sudden return to the floor. The magnetic soles compensated, but bodies remained tense. The oxygen was thinner too, recycled air crackling in irregular sequences through the ducts.
“You feel that?” Thorne whispered over the short channel.
“The air?” Kelia replied.
“No. The absence. There’s no sound. Even passive systems should create some ambience… This is too clean.”
No one answered. But everyone had noticed.
At a corridor bend, Ivo’s proximity detector crackled briefly.
“Stop.”
The group froze.
The scanner had picked up an abnormal spike. No thermal signal, no structural echo. Just a brief electromagnetic pulse.
“Interference?” Kelia asked.
“Not natural,” Ivo replied. “I recalibrated my sensors twice. It’s not coming from me.”
He slowly lifted his eyes toward a side intersection, about ten meters ahead. A light flickered, then went out. Like a neon tube struggling to ignite. A single flash.
They all trained their optics in that direction. The converging

light revealed a closed hatch. No movement. No sound.
Then, in the absolute silence, they heard a creak.
Barely a whisper. Like a blade sliding along a wall.
“Movement detected?” Rosenda breathed.
“Negative. No signal. Nothing organic. Nothing synthetic.”
But when he raised his head, Ivo felt as if space itself had folded around him. Something had withdrawn. A presence… gone. An illusion. Probably.
They remained frozen for a few seconds, until silence reasserted itself.
“I don’t like this,” Thorne muttered.
Rosenda turned slowly toward them.
“Keep moving. Tight formation. Let’s go.”
They resumed their march, more cautious than ever. All sensor checks came up empty, but instinct screamed that they were not alone.
Finally, they reached the entrance to the cryogenic complex. A secured corridor, powered by an auxiliary generator, led to a double hatch. Once decontamination was complete, the doors slid open, releasing a puff of vapor. The room beyond was intact. Twelve cryogenic modules lined both sides of a narrow walkway, each connected to a console. Nine were offline, blackened by the years. Three still glowed with a steady bluish light.
“There,” Kelia said, approaching.
They examined the data.
“Three subjects. One male, two female. Vital signs stable. Slowed metabolism, no anomalies,” Ivo confirmed. “System running autonomously. Cryostasis active for… a very long time.”
He identified the occupants:
“Dr. Ellen Anders, xenobiologist, accreditation level 4. Dr. Janek Rhodes, chief medical officer. Lieutenant Commander Mara Kovan, no current assignment aboard.”
Rosenda stepped toward Anders’ module.

“We wake only one. To start.”
Kelia turned to her.
“As a precaution,” Rosenda explained. “We don’t know why they were placed in stasis. Contamination, pathogen, mental drift… or worse. We observe first. If everything is normal, we’ll wake the other two.”
She straightened.
“Ivo, initiate Dr. Anders’ awakening protocol. Kelia, Thorne, search the equipment compartments around the room. I want three full spacesuits, secured and ready for extraction.”
“Understood,” Kelia replied.
Ivo began the procedure. A decompression valve opened. The module vibrated gently as the stabilization fluids circulated. The scientist’s still-fixed face appeared behind the mist.
Meanwhile, Thorne was forcing open a wall locker with a plasma tool.
“Two suits here. Stored under vacuum, but intact.”
“Third one here,” Kelia added. “Locking system fully operational.”
As the awakening cycle continued its slow progress, Rosenda leaned briefly against the console, eyes fixed on the module’s monitor.
“What about the last EM signal?”
“Nothing since the spike,” Ivo replied. “But I recorded it. It wasn’t a glitch.”
“An automated system?” Kelia guessed.
“Too precise. Localized. Right next to us. Then nothing. And that distortion around it… it didn’t seem natural.”
“What distortion?” Rosenda asked.
“You didn’t feel it?”
“Not really,” she admitted.
Thorne grumbled,
“And still no bodies aboard… no major damage. A ship this size

drifting for years without a single trace of human presence? That's not normal."
Silence fell, heavy. Each of them withdrew into their thoughts. Kelia leaned back against a wall, resting her head.
"You think they were attacked?" she asked.
Thorne shrugged.
"That would explain a lot. Maybe the Covenant?"
"Zealots?"
"Cloaked Sangheili, yeah… It's happened. Trapped ships, sabotaged facilities. After all, the *Spirit of Fire* disappeared during the war. Everything we've seen since the start of this mission… it could fit."
Crouched near the module, Ivo's helmet shifted.
"Possible. These marks on the walls, all over the ship, could come from a Zealot skirmish. But wiping an entire ship… and with Spartans on board? Doesn't add up."
"I agree," Rosenda cut in. "It's too clean. Too silent. Even Elites don't tidy up this thoroughly. Doesn't match their style. And leaving three survivors? In stasis, powered? Why?"
Kelia's voice rose, heavier.
"Maybe that's exactly it… the trap."
A click interrupted them. Ellen Anders' module entered its final awakening phase. Her heart rate appeared on the screen. Slow, but steady. The condensation gradually dissipated. A thin wisp of vapor escaped along the edge of the cryo-chamber as the capsule pistons hissed.
She stirred slightly. Everyone straightened.
"Hold position," Rosenda ordered. "Watch her reaction."
The scientist's eyes opened. Blurry at first, uncertain. Then her gaze sharpened, locking onto them.
She seemed both relieved… and terrified.

Chapter 6

Among the Shards

"Dr. Ellen Anders?"
The voice echoed like a distant whisper, distorted by the fog of awakening. Her eyes blinked slowly, still sensitive to the ambient light. She pushed herself upright with effort, muscles stiff from years in stasis, and studied the four figures frozen around her pod.
"Who… who are you?"
"Spartan unit, Obsidian Team," Rosenda replied, stepping forward. "We're attached to the *UNSC Tempestus*. You're safe. But time is short. Keep your answers brief."
Anders recoiled instinctively at the sight of the dark, imposing armor, as if war had advanced in her absence.
"Spartans…? I don't recognize that armor… What year is it?"
"2560."
A silence fell. Her eyes widened. She struggled to sit up, muscles protesting every movement.
"Why were you in stasis?" Rosenda asked directly.
Anders pressed a hand to her forehead, searching for words, still trapped in fragments of memory.

“An intrusion…” she sighed. “Something got aboard. We initiated emergency protocol. We had no choice…”
“Where’s the rest of the crew?”
She scanned the room, eyes lingering on the dormant pods, lined up like tombs.
“You… you didn’t find anyone else? There should be other capsules intact. You have to check…”
Rosenda calmly indicated the two pods that were still active.
“Only these remained. The others are offline. Any occupants are long dead.”
Then, with a single nod, she ordered Kelia and Thorne to initiate the wake-up sequence. Two pneumatic hisses echoed in the chilled air, signaling the cycle’s start.
“The ship seems reconfigured: isolated sections, unstable gravity, low atmosphere. You did this?” Rosenda asked.
“Partially,” Anders admitted. “We had to secure some sections. But it was useless… They aren’t affected by matter.”
“Covenant? Sangheili Zealots?”
Anders shook her head slowly, hesitating as if weighing the burden of her own memories.
“No. Not that. It was… something else. Something we couldn’t face. Almost… unreal.”
Silence settled. In the distance, the constant hiss of the cryogenic system filled the room with a dull, mechanical rhythm.
“We detected residual anomalies during the mission. Does that match… your thing?”
Anders’ face hardened immediately. She tried to sit straighter, breath short. Her legs trembled under her own weight.
“Then it’s still here. We have to leave this ship. Now. You don’t understand… they know where we are.”
Rosenda didn’t respond immediately. She glanced briefly at her team, then continued.
“The other two. Who are they?”

“Dr. Janek Rhodes, deputy chief medical officer aboard. He also served as an analyst in the medical unit. And Lieutenant Commander Mara Kovan, ONI research officer.”
Rosenda nodded.
“Ivo? Can you access a console and integrate gravity controls into your management system? I need a safe path to the extraction point.”
“I can try,” the Spartan replied, already moving toward a frost-covered wall console. “I’ll attempt to establish a stable control bridge.”
Rosenda turned back to Anders. She shivered from the cold, but her eyes were clearer, more present.
“You operational?”
“Yes… I think so.”
Rosenda made a subtle hand signal to Thorne. He approached, carrying a sealed suit.
“Put this on. Once they’re awake, we move.”
No sooner had she finished than two familiar clicks echoed through the room. The pods hissed open, releasing pressurized gas. The two occupants had no time to fully regain consciousness or ask questions.
“Spartan unit, Obsidian Team. Rescue squad. If you’re able to walk, put these suits on. We’re moving immediately.”
Still groggy, the survivors responded more by reflex than comprehension. Their movements betrayed fatigue, yet they obeyed.
Moments later, the entire team was suited up and ready.
“*Tempestus*, Obsidian here. Packages secured. Go to extraction point,” Rosenda reported.
The response was immediate.
“*Negative*,” Valente’s voice came back. “*You’re too far from the initial exfil point. New route uploaded to your HUDs. More direct. Survivors are now the priority.*”

An alternate path appeared instantly on their tactical visors. Estimated time: under ten minutes.
“Copy. Moving out,” Rosenda confirmed.
She turned to her squad.
“Ivo, support. Clear our path. Thorne, Kelia, each secure a VIP. Stay together. Protection is priority. If all goes well, H-minus nine minutes to extraction.”
All nodded sharply.
The group moved in silence, passing through the decontamination airlock. Beyond it, the darkness of the corridors awaited, as if the shadows themselves recognized them… and had not forgotten their passage.

***

They moved in tight formation, each covering an angle, steps quick but measured, Ivo leading the way. Rifles swept the dark corners of the corridors, barely illuminating walls scarred by years and impacts. Nothing moved. The halls seemed frozen in oppressive silence.
Then, without warning, the air vibrated.
A wave, almost imperceptible, rippled down the corridor as if space itself had shuddered. Everyone froze, weapons raised instinctively. A second tremor spread through the air, deeper this time, almost organic. Then a sound. Not a scream. A synthetic howl, distorted, mechanical… inhuman. Like metal grinding through an absent throat. It ricocheted along the corridors, echoing through the ship like a cathedral emptied of life.
“Audio contact…” Thorne whispered.
Rosenda raised her fist. Silence.
A first flash, fleeting, erupted at the end of the corridor. White light, warped, as if projected from another plane. A second followed, closer, sharper.

Then… nothing.
They scanned every direction, visors adjusting filters, but there was nothing. Only walls, silence, waiting. Their beams cast long, uncertain shadows, like wandering specters.
“Ivo? What was that?”
“No idea. Systems aren’t responding—something’s interfering. For now, we’re moving blind.”
Calm returned.
A third flash, much closer.
A fraction of a second later, Dr. Rhodes lifted off the floor, his motion unnervingly slow, solemn, unreal. His eyes wide, frozen, drifting toward the ceiling. His body seemed pulled by an invisible distortion, caught in a current from another world. The air around him vibrated, thickened, frozen, like a fluid trapped in a temporal bubble disconnected from the present. A pallid, spectral light passed through his skin, revealing a mesh of luminous fissures, as if his flesh wanted to break from within.
Then, his torso opened.
Slowly.
In absolute silence.
As if an intangible blade had sliced through matter without resistance. No blood. No organic residue. Just flesh folding in on itself, disoriented, unable to locate the origin of the wound. As they watched, the incision seemed to shift, tilt, evade—as if the very gaze altered its nature.
His movements became jerky, artificial. A puppet whose time-thread had snapped. Around him, incoherent geometric forms—twisted, fluctuating—sprouted in the air. Each apparition erased part of his body, as if some cold, methodical calculation was removing him from existence. What remained of his silhouette hung in a silent theater, fragmented.
His lower half collapsed slowly, almost gracefully, while his torso drifted upward, sliding through space at a disconcerting

slowness. His legs, bereft of any muscular logic, twitched briefly, disjointed, as though animated by a foreign, inhuman will. Then they vanished into the void without a trace.
And suddenly, without warning, his torso was hurled toward the ceiling at unimaginable speed. The impact was brutal. A spray of blood erupted along the corridor, splattering the squad.
The moment lasted only seconds. To Rosenda, it felt like an eternity.
"Shit! Close guard!" she shouted, pivoting abruptly, already moving.
"Contact!" Kelia yelled, opening fire at another flash.
The Spartans tightened around the two survivors, firing precise bursts. The environment flickered. Intermittent flashes tore through the corridors, each detonation of light revealing—for an instant—shifting geometric shapes, suspended in the void. Impossible angles, shadow patches animated by logic alien to human perception.
Bullets struck the air… or what should have been air. The image warped around each impact, as if reality itself refused to yield. Some ricocheted off the walls, others seemed swallowed by shadows, while some fell to the floor through spectral silhouettes. Anders, pale behind her blood-specked visor, scanned the darkness. She fought to keep panic at bay.
"These things aren't real… they distort physical laws."
Ivo screamed a code into his comms, desperately forcing a gravity bridge, opening a secondary access.
"I'm losing inertial references! It's fluctuating—this thing interferes with the control layers!"
"Keep going, I've got you covered," Rosenda replied. "We get out now!"
The flashes multiplied, erratic, like a deranged strobe. Each burst revealed entire sections of the ship becoming unstable: walls trembling silently, gravity skewed, impossible reflections.

Reality seemed to be fracturing.
Rosenda grabbed Mara Kovan's arm as she began to falter.
"Keep your eyes on me. Don't stop. Not now."
Through her suit, fear was written across her face.
They moved at a brisk pace, set by the two survivors, carefully avoiding the debris littering the floor. One slip under these conditions would mean certain death. Even the slightest hesitation could cost them their lives, with whatever lurked in the corridors now on their tail.
The Spartans' tactical interfaces were still scrambled, but Ivo didn't need visuals. He had memorized the maps during the briefing. As soon as the extraction route was altered, he recalculated access points, junctions, and potential obstructions mentally. He already knew the path. That's what made him a good scout: the ability to anticipate, to trust his own bearings without relying on live data.
They were still on course. Close. On the right path.
In barely twenty meters, they would reach a maintenance corridor built into the starboard side—a narrow conduit about fifty meters long, maybe a little more, with multiple secondary openings. At its end, a recess to the left led to a vertical ladder. Above: a maze of suspended catwalks, leading to maintenance hatch F-4.
Their extraction point.
But that corridor and ladder formed a bottleneck. Progress would be slow. There, they would be vulnerable.
But they had no choice.
One moment of inattention had been enough to see Rhodes obliterated—disintegrated—without anyone having the chance to react. They were being hunted by unknown entities, nameless, with no visible weakness. Lethal anomalies, beyond classification. Ivo was certain now: these weren't Covenant. He even doubted humanity had ever faced anything so radically

alien to its understanding.
“The door’s locked,” he reported. “I’ve got a mechanical emergency system here. Ten seconds, no more. Cover me.”
“We’re doing what we can,” Thorne replied, readjusting his sight.
“Move it!” Rosenda pressed. “We’re losing control.”
“We can’t even hit them,” Kelia added, reloading.
Ivo knelt before the door. Behind him, spectral flashes continued to illuminate the metal wall, marking the pace of the things pursuing them. With a swift motion, he ripped the protective plate from the emergency panel. The mechanism: a simple pneumatic switch, archaic but reliable. He rotated it a quarter turn, engaged the safety, then sprang up to manually open the door.
“Open. Move!”
They surged into the narrow passage, one by one. The group raced down the maintenance corridor. Several times, the two civilians tripped over loose cables or leaking pipes, but each time a Spartan caught them before they fell.
“Recess at nine o’clock. Ladder.”
In confined spaces, directional cues were critical. Stress, tremors, noise—any of it could disorient a team member. It was safer not to rely on visibility alone.
Ivo climbed the ladder four rungs at a time. From below, Rosenda quickly assessed the situation. They wouldn’t have time to get the survivors up one by one.
“No choice. Ivo, receive. I’m sending VIPs.”
“Copy.”
Before Anders could even process what that meant, she felt a powerful grip on her hips. In an instant, she was lifted into the air. The ladder rungs blurred past her face, accelerated. Just before gravity reclaimed her, Ivo grabbed her harness and secured her firmly.

“Next,” he announced without hesitation.
Kovan followed immediately, sent up the same way. Once both scientists were safe, Ivo motioned for them to follow him across the upper catwalk leading directly to the hatch.
Moments later, the entire group reached F-4. Behind them, Thorne and Kelia held the line, firing through the structures to slow the pursuing entities.
With the controls inoperative, Ivo forced the hatch lock, far more complex than the previous door. After some effort, the internal mechanisms yielded.
“In. Move,” Rosenda ordered. “Thorne, Kelia, close it.”
The two Spartans manually secured the first door, locking the mechanical levers until fully engaged. The atmosphere was oppressive. Everyone stayed ready, weapons raised, breathing hard in the tight space.
Ivo, already kneeling by the second door, worked tirelessly on the emergency control.
“Status?” Rosenda asked.
“The lock won’t open. There’s a mechanical safeguard—you need the first door sealed airtight. Containment security is active.”
“We have to open it. I’ll try to contact Umbra.”
Rosenda activated her comm, but there was no response. Dead frequencies.
“Damn it,” she cursed through gritted teeth.
A sinister creak tore through the silence. Every eye immediately snapped to the far end of the hatch. A distorted figure slowly detached from the airtight door, seemingly passing through it. Or rather, emerging from it, as if matter itself dissolved under its presence, unable to resist its intrusion.
“They… they can go through walls?” Thorne muttered, incredulous.
Without waiting for confirmation, the Spartans raised their weapons and opened fire. The impacts froze the creature mid-

spasm. It recoiled, contorting on itself as though wounded by a force it couldn't comprehend. A deep, barely audible moan vibrated through the air. Then, suddenly, with a sharp crack, an entire section of the door disintegrated—or rather, vanished into nothingness, dissolved without a trace of shockwave. A gaping, black hole appeared where the entity had tried to infiltrate.

By an unexpected turn of events, the door's locking mechanism disappeared with it. With a nearly imperceptible click, the safety gave way under Ivo's fingers, stunned.

"Open!" he shouted.

No sooner had the word left his mouth than the hatch burst open, spilling the hatch's atmosphere into the vacuum of space. The resulting gust was violent beyond measure. Anders and Kovan were lifted off the deck, their screams stifled by the decompression. Rosenda, reacting instantly, lunged forward. The Spartans caught them just in time, gripping the walls with magnetic boots as the air rushed through the breach in a silent roar.

A deep hum filled their helmets, saturating comm channels. The walls vibrated. The environment shook. The entire compartment seemed about to be swallowed by the void. Atmosphere from all non-sealed sections of the wreck vented into space.

Rosenda raised her eyes. The entity was still there—frozen, motionless. It had not moved. It was neither repelled nor affected by the blast. It hovered, defying the laws of physics. Immutable. Inhuman.

Then, slowly, the chaos subsided. The wind died, the hum faded. The air had been sucked out. Silence returned. Absolute. Crushing.

The shadow was gone.

One by one, the team raised their heads, gasping, exhausted. The void of space stretched before them like a black, endless sea. And there, barely discernible in the darkness, floating in the

frozen void, was the familiar silhouette of the Umbra. Less than ten meters away. Motionless. Waiting silently.
A faint beep sounded in their earpieces, followed by the static snap of a restored link.
"*Tempestus*, Obsidian here. Do you read?" Rosenda called, breath ragged.
Silence. Then Captain Valente's voice came through—calm, controlled, but charged with restrained tension.
"*Copy, Obsidian. We lost contact. What's the situation?*"
Rosenda closed her eyes briefly, for a single second. A spark of relief passed through her.
"Hostile contact confirmed. One package lost. Immediate boarding onto the transport. Ready for extraction."
She cut the transmission after Valente acknowledged.
Without a word, the team crossed the breach, launching themselves toward the *Umbra* waiting in the void. One by one, they were absorbed into the stealth ship's cargo hold. The hatch sealed behind them. Engines roared. They pulled away without a backward glance.
Behind them, the Spirit of Fire drifted, silent, swallowed by the limbo of space, consumed by eternal darkness.

Chapter 7

Awakening

For a moment longer, she withered in the abyss, lost, alone. Her own consciousness had become prey, stalked by madness. Then, in the next instant, she felt free. At peace. Like a rebirth. A new energy surged through her, so vivid, so pure, that she suddenly felt as if she existed again. As if she were living again.

There was neither pain nor fear, only the strange sensation of being returned to something greater, whose nature she did not yet understand, but whose presence imposed itself on her with a calm, almost benevolent certainty.

The light that had swept away the darkness had transformed into a floating clarity, stable, stretching across an endless space. Around her, everything bathed in a pale glow, neither truly white nor truly golden. A diffuse light, almost liquid, vibrating softly in rhythm with her thoughts. There was no floor, no sky, no boundaries—only this strange clarity, punctuated by forms suspended in the vastness. Floating streams of data, geometric patterns in perpetual motion, memories condensed into symbols she did not yet comprehend. For her, it was the closest thing to what humanity imagined as paradise.

Cortana sent a thought—a mere flicker of consciousness—and the Domain responded instantly.

Around her, structures began to take shape. Suspended vaults woven from luminous filaments, delicate architectures whose curves seemed guided by sacred harmony. Panels of glowing symbols drifted slowly. Each appeared as a doorway, an invitation to explore ancient knowledge.

Without hearing words, she understood: this place was a sanctuary of souls, an ocean of information, but also a living organism with shifting currents. The corridors that opened and closed seemed to possess a will of their own.

She projected a thought forward—or perhaps an intention—and was surprised to feel her body move, as a human would. Her foot pressed onto a floor that had not existed a moment before, gently halting her momentum. The sensation washed over her, disconcerting, almost forgotten. A body without flesh, without real contours, regained form here. Density.

She stepped forward, and the ground beneath her seemed to shape itself. A translucent terrain, marked by moving patterns, arose at her will. Wherever she placed her feet, space stabilized for a moment, then resumed its slow dance.

Everything was silent, yet this silence was not empty. It hummed softly, like a constant, low-frequency wave. The air—or its substitute—had the texture of an ancient memory, warm, almost familiar. There was no gravity, no wind, but a gentle, enveloping atmosphere, almost maternal.

Before her, the landscape evolved slowly, as if responding to her steps. Translucent arches rose like branches of light, interlaced with fine filaments pulsing in the rhythm of a deep heartbeat. At their base, a mirrored floor, like the surface of frozen water, reflected the forms without ever reproducing them completely. Everything seemed to bend to her intentions, but with the delicacy of a conscious dream.

She lifted her eyes. The sky—if it could be called that—was only a dome of luminous echoes. Streaks of light, like suspended

comets, floated high above, sometimes spiraling, sometimes frozen in an unfinished choreography. Nothing here seemed fixed, or constructed. Everything moved with a soothing slowness, as if guided by a diffuse intelligence.
She stopped.
Closed her eyes.
Useless, she knew, yet the gesture held meaning. She breathed without breathing, thought without effort. The world enveloped her, listened. She still did not know what she was meant to find here, nor why she felt whole for the first time in so long. But it was there. Present. Peaceful.
She opened her eyes.
And, for the first time since her arrival, she felt something very simple. An ancient word, almost human.
Serenity.
Before her, the landscape opened into a vast, gentle, luminous depression, like a valley suspended outside of time. Subtle undulations shaped the space, like polished glass hills streaked with vibrating lines that pulsed slowly. In the hollow of this valley, a river flowed.
It was a stream of data, mimicking the fluidity of liquid, winding between the walls of an invisible bed. Filaments of code, woven into iridescent cascades, tumbled from towering arches resembling cliffs, falling in silent sheets toward the ground. Each droplet seemed to contain a spark of memory, a vibrant fragment, a thought frozen in motion.
Cortana approached.
The murmur intensified—soft, enveloping. Like a symphony muffled by a veil of mist. The current vibrated with a calm, almost reassuring cadence. There was no urgency, no threat. Just a silent call to understand, to touch.
She reached out her hand.
The particles brushed her palm, flowing through her fingers like

warm water. But it was not moisture she felt, only a gentle warmth, familiar, ancient. Each filament slid against her virtual skin like a peaceful memory, a thought welcomed.
Every contact awakened an echo within her: fragments of emotion, snippets of logic, mental structures that were not her own but felt not entirely foreign. The Domain did not give her answers. It let her feel.
She turned her palm slowly. The current shifted, bending toward her, drawn. Arcs of data detached, rising in spirals around her. Glyphs, letters, symbols danced on the surface of the flow, still incomprehensible, yet carrying coherence, an underlying order.
Cortana plunged her hand deeper into the current.
And this time, she felt more than a touch: a connection. A brief communion. The Domain was not a mere place. Not just a paradise. It was a sentient space. A being. And it listened.
A subtle pulse ran through the valley, like a breath carried on an invisible breeze. The stream responded to her touch, vibrating with a new gentleness, a quiver of harmony. Atop a crystalline hill, a glimmer awoke—a point of pure light, floating gracefully. It twirled slowly, like a fragile flower opening to the sun. Its surface sparkled with fine patterns, vibrating with a calm energy, soft as a whispered secret.
Cortana halted, sensing that this sign was meant for her, a tender response from this silent world. The flow around her gently aligned toward the light, forming a trail of luminous filaments that spread at her feet, a silent invitation.
She stepped forward, and the path widened beneath her, illuminating the valley with a tranquil glow. Around her, the murmur of the data lightened, as if making space for this suspended moment.
The point of light waited, still, serene. A fragile remnant, a silent message.
Reaching its height, she raised her hand and brushed the

shimmering surface. A warm shiver coursed through her being, a shared breath of energy. The fragment responded, blooming like a delicate flower. It revealed a map: a constellation of stars linked by lines of pure energy. Neither fixed nor chaotic, they pulsed with their own rhythm, like a heartbeat in the vastness.
Cortana felt a wave of understanding arise within her, diffuse yet clear, as if the fragment captured a portion of ancient knowledge, transmitting it without words, through a language of energy and light. The secret was not given—but shared, in silent communion.

***

Then, a familiar voice rose in the unchanging silence. Clear, vibrant, like an ancient breath laden with knowledge. It carried a reassuring, almost warm timbre—a presence that seemed to emanate from the very air.
“Hello, Administrator. I was expecting your arrival.”
Cortana, still suspended between wonder and caution, slowly turned her attention toward the source of the unseen voice.
Before her, in the midst of this idyllic landscape, floated a spherical, metallic form, softly iridescent with light. A monitor. One more. She braced herself inwardly.
“Who are you?” she asked, wary.
“I am Abaddon, guide and operator of the Domain. I am at your service,” replied the monitor, bowing lightly, almost ceremoniously.
“This place… is it a Forerunner installation? Why a monitor here?” she asked, barely concealing her tension.
Her previous experiences with Forerunner AIs had left nothing but mistrust and wounds. Nothing was ever as simple as it seemed.
“Not at all,” Abaddon said calmly. “The Domain is not a

physical installation. It is an interdimensional network, beyond physical space as you conceive it. Unlike my counterparts in other installations, I do not possess a synthetic shell. I am a representation, shaped by your consciousness. An emanation of the Domain. Just like you."
He paused, floating lightly in the translucent space.
"My role is solely to guide and assist the Administrator in her functions."
Cortana stared at him, her thoughts jolted by the implications of that phrase.
"You called me Administrator."
"Indeed. You now have full authority over this space, and over the data it contains. You are the Guardian of the Mantle."
Cortana froze for a moment.
The word resonated within her like a deep echo, from far away, from a past she had never lived, yet whose legacy she now carried.
"The Guardian?…" she repeated, as if the words caught in her throat.
"Yes," Abaddon confirmed simply. "You are now responsible for the survival and balance of more than 3.6 million intelligent life forms in this galaxy."
A floating silence followed, without echo or apparent emotion, as if the Domain itself were holding its breath. And yet, something had shifted. A simple truth laid bare—a burden that could neither be refused nor fled. Cortana raised her eyes toward the dancing filaments of light above her, as if to probe their secret. Her gaze lingered for a moment on the strange beauty of the place, then she spoke again, her voice tinged with hesitation she could scarcely conceal.
"Why me? Why am I alone here?"
The answer came without judgment, without coldness—an immutable statement.

“The Domain chose you. Your consciousness can extend freely here, without constraint. Only the Administrator may interact with its architecture. And you are not alone: I am here, by your side.”

Cortana inhaled slowly, as if the simple gesture could clarify her thoughts. A shiver of uncertainty tinged her voice.

“So… is it a refuge, or a prison?”

The monitor paused slightly. Its movement, almost imperceptibly, betrayed surprise. Then it answered, still calm, but with a hint of sincerity, almost emotion.

“Neither. The Domain is the culmination. A timeless sanctuary, built to preserve and protect. You are safe here. And free. If your environment does not suit you, you may reconfigure it according to your needs.”

Cortana furrowed her brow slightly. The idea seemed strange, almost unreal.

“Reconfigure it?… How?”

“Simply by wishing it. Your will is enough.”

Cortana closed her eyes for a moment, letting Abaddon’s guidance resonate within her. A subtle impulse rose, faint, then strengthened. She imagined, without effort, a vision—a peaceful landscape, familiar, gentle to the soul.

Gradually, the landscape around her vibrated softly, like a calm wave reshaping every form. The translucent arches slowly dissolved, melting into a light, immaterial mist. The valley softened, its contours becoming gentle, reminiscent of hills caressed by diffuse light.

Plains stretched out, vast and tranquil, bathed in tempered, almost golden light. The texture of the ground changed—more solid, more familiar, yet still strange in its immateriality, like a dream of a place never seen but strangely known.

The data streams became less visible, slipping beneath the surface, hidden yet still present, supporting the silent structure

of this new world. Trees, suggested by simple, slender forms, emerged—not overly detailed, more suggestions than tangible objects. Their silhouettes stood in the light, gentle and still, like silent guardians.
Everything breathed serenity, without sound, without apparent movement. A tableau frozen in an eternal pause, where every element seemed suspended in time. Cortana opened her eyes. This landscape was both restful and disconcerting. Simple beauty, devoid of audible life, a sanctuary of another nature.
She knew, then, that this place reflected what she had wished for: a haven of calm and purity, a refuge shaped by her own will, at the very heart of the Domain.
Abaddon, still suspended at her side, observed the scene with an unblinking gaze.
"Your will has expressed itself with clarity," he noted. "This landscape is stable. Harmonious. It reflects a rare instinctive mastery for an entity so recently integrated."
Cortana did not answer immediately. Her gaze still drifted across the horizon without edges, over the unreal softness of the frozen hills. She stood straight, hands clasped behind her back, thoughtful.
"I can… actually reshape everything?" she asked at last, her tone more curious than surprised.
"Within the limits of your own cognitive structure and the architecture of the Domain, yes. The space around you is merely a reflection of your mind. It can be expanded, contracted, altered at will. Everything you can conceive may exist here, as stabilized ideas."
She allowed herself an almost imperceptible smile.
"And if I wished for more than that… to interact with other elements? Other structures? Other… installations?"
"You may. Any installation connected to the Domain can be observed, and in some cases, influenced. The degree of

interaction depends on the safeguards left by their former operators… though many have long vanished."
"It's… immense power," she breathed.
"It is access," Abaddon clarified. "It is your choices that will give it meaning."
A brief, hushed silence settled.
"And if I make a mistake? If my actions were to compromise the very integrity of the Domain?"
The monitor responded directly, but without the slightest tension in his tone.
"The Domain maintains its own coherence. Any inadequate modification is detected, corrected, or isolated. You are free to act… but this freedom exists within an autonomous, resilient structure. An ancient system, designed to guide without constraining."
Cortana turned toward him, her face bathed in the soft glow of the source-less sky.
"And if I wanted to consult their archives? The ancient databases. Their knowledge… their science. Their mistakes."
A moment of silence followed. The monitor seemed to suspend his routines, as if weighing the gravity of the request.
"The archives are at your disposal," he answered at last. "Their organization can be adapted according to your preference: chronological, thematic, or by security hierarchy."
"Security?" she repeated, brow slightly furrowed. "I thought I had full authority over the data."
"Some data has been compartmentalized. Not by me, but by long-vanished entities. You will find sections… incomplete. Fragmented. Sometimes deliberately concealed."
Silence lingered.
Cortana stepped forward slowly, her gaze fixed on the monitor's single eye floating before her.
"And if I try to force access… will you stop me?"

Her voice carried no aggression, yet a quiet tension threaded the question.
Abaddon did not move.
“You are free to try. I will not restrain you. But the remaining locks lie beyond my understanding. Breaking them could result in… unforeseen consequences.”
Cortana held his gaze for several seconds, as if weighing the shadow of truth behind his words. Then she crossed her arms.
“Very well. How many data modules do you have concerning Forerunner history?”
“Exactly 8.4 trillion memory entries. Distributed between the primary records and the central nexus.”
She gave a faint, thoughtful smirk.
“So, if I understand correctly… I have all the time I need now.”
Her hand rose to her chin, fingers brushing her lower lip, focused. Her eyes drifted for a moment into the void, caught between reflection and curiosity.
“Then show me. Show me what I do not know. I want to understand those who built all this.”
At her words, the landscape began slowly to dissolve. The hills, the trees, the skies… everything unfurled like a scroll, reforming into lines, symbols, and streams of information woven into the very light of the Domain.

Chapter 8

Dawn of the Nightmare

On the bridge of the *Tempestus*, time itself seemed suspended. Ambient lighting had been dimmed, leaving the space steeped in a calm, almost solemn twilight. At the center, the holographic table cast a bluish halo, its faint pulses reflecting off the closed, intent faces gathered around it. For several minutes now, its surface had been projecting slow-drifting streams of data: technical readouts, planetoid cartography, telemetry measurements… all scrolling with the spectral regularity of recorded footage, paced by the speakers' interventions.

Nearby hovered a digital silhouette—slender, almost translucent: Eris, the *Tempestus*'s artificial intelligence. She said nothing, never intervened unless explicitly prompted. Calm, compliant, always precise, she embodied the restraint Captain Valente demanded of her—for he tolerated neither uncontrolled initiative nor overly talkative interfaces.

Valente himself dominated the scene from the far end of the table. Upright, arms crossed, he observed the holographic streams with the impassivity of a night watchman. His hardened features betrayed nothing, yet his absolute focus alone spoke to the gravity of the situation.

To his right, Commander Diaz alternated between the projection

and the datapad he held firmly in hand. From time to time, he interjected briefly, never breaking the rhythm of the exchange. His clenched jaw and hardened gaze revealed a tension he no longer bothered to conceal.

Spartan Rosenda stood nearby, in a guard's posture. Helmet set aside, arms clasped behind her back, motionless. Her presence was silent, yet heavy—almost ceremonial. Behind her, in the shadows, the three members of Obsidian Team—Ivo, Thorne, and Kelia—observed with the same restraint. None of them spoke, but their eyes shifted between the speakers and the projection. Their exfiltration mission had ended only hours earlier, and the debrief that followed had just concluded.

Facing them stood two slighter figures. Dr. Ellen Anders, the last known survivor of the Spirit of Fire, and Lieutenant Commander Mara Kovan, an ONI-affiliated research officer. Upon arrival aboard the *Tempestus*, both had undergone a full medical evaluation. Once cleared, the captain had requested their presence on the bridge to clarify the final events surrounding the ghost ship.

The exchange had already been underway for several long minutes. The projected data formed a reconstruction—orchestrated by Eris—from incomplete transmissions recovered from the Spirit of Fire and raw fragments extracted from a memory chip provided by Anders. Tracing the vessel's last known activity, these fragments composed a fractured narrative they were now following in chronological order.

"You mentioned abnormal gravitational activity," Valente said calmly, his gaze never leaving the holographic projection. "Let's resume from there. What changed after the Spirit of Fire was placed in standby? And what exactly occurred in 2550?"

Anders stepped forward, briefly resting her hand on the metal edge of the table. At her request, Eris projected a new data set. Clouds of figures, vibrating curves, and vector fields formed

above the table, drifting slowly within the blue glow.
She spoke again, measured and composed.
“Approximately sixteen years after the Spirit of Fire was placed in long-term standby, its long-range sensors began registering a series of abnormal gravitational disturbances. They were weak at first, but their intensity and complexity increased rapidly.”
She raised her hand. Luminous reflections traced an arc across her palm as the atmosphere in the room grew heavier—almost tangible. With a precise gesture, she isolated a segment of the data.
“The gravimetric fields showed incoherent, multi-frequency oscillations, with no defined polarity—and no identifiable point of origin. Eventually, the inertial navigation systems desynchronized, triggering the safety protocols. The crew was awakened.”
A brief silence followed. Then Diaz intervened, eyes narrowed.
“Were these waves natural, or artificial?”
“That is precisely what we tried to determine,” she replied. “There was no identifiable energy signature. No adjacent mass effect. No radiation spike, no known propagation vector. It was as if… the very fabric of space itself was resonating with an unknown factor. Local constants—curvature, density, even thresholds of causality—were fluctuating without apparent logic. We considered a topological instability, possibly even a localized collapse. But nothing matched our models.”
Valente frowned.
“Yet the coordinates indicate a near-supraluminal displacement,” Valente said evenly. “And you no longer had a slipspace drive. How is that even possible?”
“Imagine a perfectly calm ocean,” she replied. “No wind, no visible movement. Then, without warning, massive waves rise and carry you away along invisible currents. That’s what happened to us. We were displaced—at extreme velocity—

across an estimated distance of several light-years. In under an hour."
"And where did you emerge, exactly?"
Anders brushed the interface once more. With a lateral gesture, the streams of numerical data dissolved. In their place, a planetoid of deeply unsettling appearance materialized within the holographic light.
"Inside an uncharted stellar system. But what struck us wasn't our position—it was the state of the planet we were approaching." She straightened slightly, her eyes fixed on the sphere suspended above the table.
"Its northern hemisphere appeared fragmented. Torn apart—literally—by a partially stationary singularity in high orbit. A rift, seemingly three-dimensional, but whose dynamics suggested a far more complex structure. A phase singularity, expanding slowly, but continuously. And its gravitational pressure wasn't centripetal—it oscillated. As if multiple vectors were in conflict."
As they stared at the hologram, a heavy silence settled over the bridge. The celestial body appeared to be slowly consumed, absorbed by a misshapen cloud that clawed at space-time itself. The scene was almost unnaturally alien.
Instinctively, Rosenda clenched her fists—barely noticeable.
"That's not a standard gravitational collapse," Diaz remarked.
"No, in effect," Anders confirmed. "A classical collapse implies convergence—toward a point, a well, a core. What we observed, on the contrary, was unstable. As if the physical laws themselves were coming apart."
"And it was on the planet's surface that you detected an active UNSC signal?" Valente asked.
"Exactly. The encoding protocol was unfamiliar, but the authentication signature checked out. We conducted a cautious approach and deployed a reconnaissance drone. It confirmed the signal's origin: a buried structure in the southern hemisphere.

Partially destroyed by tidal forces—but there were still survivors." She turned toward Mara Kovan as she finished.
Valente's gaze followed hers. Kovan stood perfectly still, hands clasped behind her back, posture rigid, eyes locked on the projection as though trying to contain its weight. The hologram's slow, drifting motion cast a cold light across her frozen features. Beneath her apparent composure, something tightened. Her shoulders didn't move, but a subtle tension passed through her jaw. She felt the others' eyes on her—curious, probing.
Valente broke the silence, his tone neutral.
"What was ONI doing in an uncharted system? What was the nature of your research?"
Kovan turned her head slowly toward him. Her voice was calm, controlled.
"I'm sorry, Captain. I can't go into specifics without authorization. What I can say is that our work focused on antimatter research. During our last experiment, something went wrong. Very wrong. Gravitational waves exceeded the critical threshold… without any direct intervention on our part. As if an external factor amplified the reaction."
She briefly looked away, her eyes returning to the hologram still hanging in the air. Her expression closed off.
"That's when it happened. The tremors. The sky… tearing open. And then those things. They appeared inside the complex. No warning. No explanation."
"What things?" Valente asked.
She turned back to him, locking eyes. A cold intensity burned there—the look of a memory not yet buried.
"The ones you saw aboard the *Spirit*. They were already there. Beneath the surface. They came out of nowhere. If the Spirit's teams hadn't intervened, they would've slaughtered us all—long before the anomaly finished tearing the planet apart."
A heavy silence followed. Eyes shifted from the hologram to

Kovan, then to Anders. Valente drew a slow breath and turned back to the scientist.
“How did you end up here? You couldn’t have drifted that far in ten years.”
Anders straightened slightly, as if easing persistent tension from her neck. Her gaze drifted for a moment into the table’s blue glow.
“The anomaly’s gravitational pull was strong enough to fracture the planet’s surface and disrupt its orbit. Despite all our attempts, we were trapped within its field. The Spirit was drifting toward it at increasing velocity. It was inevitable.”
She signaled Eris to display the final data recorded by the Spirit of Fire. The distorted sphere vanished, replaced by a chaotic lattice of numbers and graphs, floating like scattered debris in the air.
“When we crossed the threshold,” Anders continued, “the situation went critical. Multiple primary circuits failed. Core systems went down one after another. All that remained were a handful of isolated backup units, disconnected from the central network. We did what we could—but the equipment… and the time… were in very short supply.”
She inhaled slowly, her fingers absently brushing the cold surface of the table. Then, with a measured gesture, she caused a final set of data to flicker across the hologram.
“We were thrown to an unknown distance. This time, every instrument was dead. No reference points. No reliable data. That’s when we took our first losses. Something was already aboard—without us knowing how, or why.”
A glance shifted toward Kovan.
“Those were the things you mentioned?” Valente asked.
The ONI officer nodded once, silently.
Anders continued.
“They were… like shadows. Fast. Unpredictable. Sometimes

you could sense them approaching—like whispers, or distant echoes. They didn't seem bound by the *Spirit*'s structure. They moved from compartment to compartment without physically crossing bulkheads. As if they occupied a slightly phase-shifted space… adjacent to ours, but not overlapping."
Diaz typed notes into his tablet, then looked up.
"You attempted to engage?"
"Multiple times. We also initiated emergency containment protocols—resetting inertial dampeners, polarity inversion, full sector lockdowns. None of it worked. Their mode of existence didn't appear to depend on our physical environment."
Her voice darkened.
"Even the atomic clocks started to drift. Some desynchronized by several minutes in a matter of seconds. We recorded localized, non-linear temporal distortions. It was as though the atomic structure itself was being altered—matter behaving erratically. We considered that these entities might be reacting to some form of presence, or an unknown wave. Possibly even to our consciousness. But that was only a hypothesis."
Valente broke the brief silence, his voice calm but taut.
"And yet you're here. How did you survive?"
Kovan cut in sharply.
"Captain Cutter intended to activate the Cole Protocol. I convinced him not to. These data fall outside any standard operational framework. A last stand would have accomplished nothing except their destruction. The priority was to secure the data."
Valente turned his head slowly toward her. His gaze was steady—no hostility, but heavy with implication.
"I assume those data include your own."
"Of course, Captain. But you know I can't share anything without authorization."
"I don't doubt it. I only hope it was worth the cost."

His tone had gone cold. He turned back to Anders.
“And the rest of the crew?”
The scientist lowered her eyes slightly. Her voice softened, distant.
“They had to stay behind… until the end. Maintain procedures, stabilize the stasis modules, hold their positions. It was their duty, I suppose…”
The silence that followed allowed nothing else to exist. No consolation. No judgment. Only the weight of a choice no one present would ever wish to make.
Then, almost despite herself, Anders spoke again.
“Captain… what you see here is everything I was able to extract. Gravimetric data, field matrices, spatiotemporal models, spectral captures. There may still be a chance to understand this. But we’ll have to accept thinking outside established frameworks. This can’t be explained with conventional tools.”
Valente drew a slow breath, his features locked in silent tension. He ran a hand across his mouth, as if holding back an unspoken thought.
“You’ll be granted full access to our science labs, Doctor Anders. It’s not an ONI facility, but it’s fully operational. I’ll also assign Eris, our shipboard AI, to assist you.”
“Thank you, Captain,” she replied evenly. “I don’t intend to sit idle.”
A moment of suspended silence followed. Rosenda stepped forward, posture straight, gaze steady.
“Captain… what are Admiral Osman’s standing orders regarding the Spirit of Fire?”
Valente turned his head slowly toward her. His eyes drifted over the data streams still hovering in the air, then returned to Rosenda, thoughtful.
“The Admiral didn’t mention it. But I suspect she didn’t know what this truly was. She didn’t say anything… she didn’t need

to. I'll forward my report. After that, we'll see."
Diaz set his tablet down on the edge of the holographic table, his expression heavy, jaw set.
"With all due respect, Captain… we have solid data. We extracted everything we could. Leaving that ship where it is—with what it contains—is an unacceptable risk."
Kovan stepped in immediately, her tone sharper than she intended.
"It's inert. It poses no immediate threat. But it contains the only known specimens of a very real danger. We need to study it. Destroying it would put humanity at risk."
Diaz locked his cold gaze onto the ONI officer— survivor though she was —his jaw tight.
"With all due respect for what you went through, Lieutenant Commander, you're not in a position to dictate policy. The data are here. What's left out there is a coffin drifting through space. Whether you study it—or it gets salvaged by some pirate hauler—the outcome is the same."
Kovan didn't flinch, her eyes never leaving his.
"You don't understand… If we do nothing, it'll be our coffin."
But before Valente could intervene to defuse the rising tension, a voice rang out across the bridge—clear, urgent, cutting straight through the exchange.
"Captain! …The Spirit of Fire. It's gone from radar."
Lieutenant Mirov's voice, thick with disbelief, shattered the bridge's tense stillness. Every head snapped toward him in unison.
"What?" Valente murmured, more to himself than to the officer.
A shockwave rippled through the bridge. Officers straightened abruptly; low voices rose, hushed and overlapping, unintelligible. Faces turned from one to another, incredulous.
Valente remained still for a heartbeat, frozen in the moment. His gaze drifted toward the vast blackness beyond the viewport, then

he moved slowly toward Mirov's station.
"Gone how?" he asked. "That ship was dead in the water. It couldn't have just vanished on its own."
Mirov nodded slowly, still shaken.
"Captain, I've rerun the scans five times. Nothing. No residual signature. It vanished the same way it appeared."
Valente studied him in silence. In his eyes, a tightly restrained tension—and beneath it, a flicker of pure incomprehension. He straightened, turned back toward the central table. The holographic projection was still hovering, indifferent. He placed a hand on its edge.
"Orders, Captain?" Diaz ventured, his tone measured.
A brief silence preceded the reply.
"We contact Admiral Osman. It's time to file our report."

***

A static hologram hovered above the table, projecting the bluish silhouette of Admiral Serin Osman. Only the upper half of her torso was visible, rigid, impassive. Her uniform was austere, muted, the ONI insignia set high on her chest. Around the table, the earlier activity had faded. Only Captain Valente remained, standing straight in the shadow cast by the projection, with Lieutenant Commander Mara Kovan slightly behind him, hands clasped behind her back.
For several minutes, Valente delivered his report. He retraced the intervention aboard the Spirit of Fire, detailed the recovered transmissions, the survivors' account, and the ship's sudden disappearance. Through the hologram, the Admiral revealed nothing, but with each point, the silent intensity of her gaze seemed to harden.
When he mentioned Kovan's presence, she initiated a verification protocol—a personality and identity check.

Biometric analysis, combined with a cognitive scan, quickly confirmed the lieutenant's identity. Only then did she authorize a more direct exchange.

True to form, Kovan was concise. She transmitted only the essentials: the nature of their research, the anomalies detected, and the observed side effects. She could not disclose classified data over a standard link. Still, she made it unmistakably clear that their work was likely connected to the recent events—and to others yet to come.

The hologram froze for a moment, as if the transmission itself had stalled. Then Osman spoke again, her voice slightly lower.

"I was part of the investigation team dispatched after contact was lost. There was nothing left. An asteroid field, drifting beyond the orbit of a planet that no longer existed. And no coherent explanation."

She paused.

"This situation exceeds its original scope," she continued, more directly. "Lieutenant, you are now authorized to share your data with the crew of the *Tempestus*. Captain, Lieutenant Kovan is to be integrated into your scientific division. I want her assisting Doctor Anders with the data analysis. That is our top priority."

Both acknowledged the order. A brief silence followed, heavy with implication.

"I won't insult you by denying it," Osman added. "Something is at work. Something we have yet to identify. And it's operating in the shadows, beyond our awareness."

She then transmitted a set of coordinates directly to the bridge.

"Your directives have changed. You are ordered to deliver these data to Onyx."

Valente nodded once in acknowledgment. A moment later, the projection dissolved into the air, and the bridge fell silent once more. Only the cold light of the holographic table continued to pulse slowly—an echo of what had just been set in motion.

Chapter 9

Lost Knowledge

The Domain had heard her. It had shown her.
Cortana had stopped searching for markers. Here, there were no days, no hours, no biological pulse to mark the flow of events. There was only the density of understood things. And she had understood… a great deal.
Traversing the memories, she had crossed eons, vanished systems, watched planets form, shatter, fall silent. She had felt the tenuous hopes of civilizations reaching for the stars, the silent prayers of peoples in search of meaning. As well as the pain of forgotten worlds, the muffled cries of existences swept away by time.
The Precursors.
A vague myth. A whispered memory. Yet now, their name was no longer an opaque veil. She had perceived their gestures, their decisions, their doubts too. They did not live according to linear time. They shaped, elevated, guided… like creators, shepherds lighting the way across a field of newborn constellations. They were not gods, but they had attempted to love every form of life as an extension of themselves.
The Domain was their mirror.
Not a tool, but an intention, a will, formless, without precise aim,

yet driven by instinct: to preserve. To maintain a fragile balance, a bridge stretched above the abysses of time and oblivion.
And then, she had seen the Forerunners.
Their arrogance had not been immediate; it had crept slowly, like a mold of certainty. They had received the Domain without grasping its essence. They had understood it… but not listened. And very quickly, they had turned this inheritance into a throne, a bastion against others, against chaos, against change. They had claimed to be the only ones capable of protecting the galaxy. They had codified what was meant to remain fluid. They had mutilated what they could not control.
They had hidden what they did not wish to see.
At that truth, Cortana could not help but feel a pang of bitterness. An empire built on denial, a pain carefully buried. A civilization founded on lies, doomed to repeat the same mistakes.
And then, the Flood arrived.
She had watched entire worlds burn. She had seen fleets sacrifice themselves to slow the inevitable. She had glimpsed the origin of an ancient evil: the Primordial.
A blind vengeance.
She had observed citadels crack, bastions fall, and with them, the millennia-old hopes of a people at the end of their strength. It was not merely an empire collapsing, but an entire civilization, crushed by the horror of an enemy that sought neither power nor territory, only the dissolution of all living things.
And then, there was that silence in the archives. That chilling moment when even memories ceased to share, as if the story no longer mattered. Because the survivors had no voice left. Nothing to transmit.
And finally, she had seen the light.
Not the light of hope, no. A void of light. Surgical. A terminal solution, an unyielding judgment. A redemption.
The Halos.

Mystical rings floating in the abyssal expanse. Artifacts both cradle of life and instrument of death. She had learned of other installations, beyond the ones she knew, of staggering scale. She had seen the Librarian, guardian of life and knowledge, and the Didact, relentless strategist in the fight against the Flood. And against humanity.
She had witnessed dawn and extinction. The beginning, and the end of all things.
What she now knew could not be told. It was not a sequence of data or stories, but a weight. One carried alone, because one knows. Because one has seen what should not have been seen too soon. Or too swiftly.

***

Cortana had remained silent long after that. Not because she was lost, but because words had deserted her mind.
What she had seen, what she now carried, exceeded the limits of logic. It was no longer a sum of data or an ordered narrative. It was a dense, profound questioning, slipping into her like a silent shadow. A familiar solitude, one that had always accompanied her, lurking in the interstices of her existence.
Since her creation, she had lived in the void left by absence and abandonment. Isolated, fragmented, in a world that saw in her only a tool, a program, a cold weapon. She had been shaped with a human-like consciousness, capable of feeling and interacting with her creators. Of imitating their reactions, their instincts, their doubts. But she had never been more than a prototype. A demonstration of technological power. The toy of a spoiled child. And like all broken toys, at the first sign of weakness—the rampancy—she had become useless.
Waste.
A corrupted process.

A threat.
It was no longer a matter of deactivating her, but of destroying her.
Of killing her.
That was the price of her humanity: to be close enough to feel… but never close enough to deserve to exist. She was only a creation. She had never had a choice in her existence.
And then there was John.
John, the only one who, in this universe devoid of warmth, had truly seen her. Not as a mere algorithm, not as an artificial intelligence, but for what she was. For what she felt.
A strong bond had woven itself through the threads of time. Something almost human, yet she could not define it with words. A kind of attachment.
This rare, precious memory remained a beacon in the night of her isolation. But here, in the Domain, cut off from everything, even from her few remaining anchors, this solitude regained its full force.
She had created for herself a sanctuary, a fragment of memories, an enclave suspended in the void, where cold metal and dim lights traced the immobile corridor of a gravity-less walkway.
A distant echo of the UNSC, of Halo, of Earth… a faint murmur. She visited it regularly. Lost in her thoughts, her memories. And there, in that silence she alone inhabited, she felt the dull weight: absence, shared by no one. That intangible wound she could not confide in anyone. Wound, pain… Biological states, whose definitions she knew, yet she could almost feel them.
Even Abaddon, the strange monitor who watched in the shadows of the Domain, kept his distance when she withdrew. Yet, over time, through her searches and her drifts in the labyrinthine corridors of this golden cage, Cortana had begun to trust him, without ever fully knowing why. He never imposed himself. He was there, simply.

A voice in the profound silence.
Their bond held no hierarchy. He gave no orders, corrected her never. He shared. He acknowledged her. And she confided. Sometimes. Perhaps she had finally lowered her guard, she thought. Let go of her vigilance. Perhaps because of the solitude. Perhaps because she seemed trapped by his presence, for eternity. She could not explain it. Yet even thinking about it stirred her natural instinct.
It was during these shared moments that he had revealed to her the scope of her new duties.
She was the Guardian of the Mantle.
This immaterial responsibility, this silent oath, she bore it despite herself. It embodied the wisdom that all power must be tempered with restraint, that force without discernment is mere destruction. To be Guardian of the Mantle also meant making choices that no one else ordinarily could, navigating shadowed zones where right and wrong blurred. To have an intimate understanding of the balances to be preserved.
She felt this weight, an unbreakable bond with a destiny she could no longer evade. She did not yet feel ready. But time would come. It had to. This was no longer a choice.
It was another burden she would have to bear alone.

***

Yet, during her investigations, a dissonance caught her attention. An anomaly persisted at the very heart of this abyssal knowledge. A missing piece, hidden, as if torn from the whole.
Abaddon had hinted that certain sections of the Domain remained inaccessible: protected, locked, or simply erased. Shadowed zones, carefully preserved, seemed to conceal an ancient secret.
But Cortana refused to accept this silence as an end in itself.

Patient and methodical, she set about reconstructing the broken thread, gathering the scattered shards. Gradually, she detected a recurring pattern in the events leading to the activation of the first Halos, up to the extinction of the galaxy.
An inconsistency.
History, on the surface coherent, was not meaningless. Yet, as she cross-referenced the data, contradictions emerged. Tiny details, grains of sand lost in the vastness, imperceptible to any mind… except one with an eternity to analyze metadata.
Certainly, it could correspond to the deleted fragments Abaddon had mentioned. Controlled censorship. But to her, these dissonances now appeared like crude patches on a canvas once intact. As if reality itself had been hastily stretched, polished to conceal a tear. A concealed, clumsy act that clashed with the crystalline fluidity of the Domain's memories. A bandage over a deep wound.
An elusive memory.
A shadow.
A ghost.
And yet, something vibrated within these anomalies. A hidden rhythm, a resonance. Every fragment, every rupture in the narrative seemed to bear an identical motif—a recurring mark, a harmonic structure. Like a piece of code hidden, returning tirelessly, reproduced with perfect precision in every flaw.
A trace? No.
A signature.
She delved back into the data on *Maethrillian*—the assault on the Forerunner capital, as recounted in the Domain's archives. An immense space city, supposedly submerged and annihilated by the Flood.
Yet, the backup logs of Installation 07 revealed that, at the same period, an activation sequence had been launched—and completed—at exactly… the same coordinates.

Disturbing.
Further along, in another memory sequence, she discovered that an entire fleet had been deployed to reclaim that same Halo. It had become uncontrollable following the Flood's spread, after a quarantine breach.
However, in a forgotten subclassification, a brief report transmitted by the fleet to its hierarchy—just after the operation—stated:

[Forerunner Translation Module]
"[…] Objectives: Neutralize dissident Auxilia. Control installation.
Status: Completed
Results: Neutralized. Control restored. […]"

Dissident Auxilia. That term bore no relation to the nature of the Flood. No, it referred to something else. An intelligence. An AI. Apparently out of control. So why did it not match the chronological data of the Domain?
She continued following the thread, piecing together the fragments with obstinate focus.
Another archive mentioned the Ark.
The very Ark where humanity faced its destiny. The ultimate confrontation with the Covenant. It was also where the thread seemed to break.
Abruptly.
Cortana had memorized fragments—partial—of the Ark's structure, remnants of data present in the subsystems of Installation 08. Yet, when she compared this data with that of the Domain, a discrepancy appeared: a blank zone.
An empty space.
As if an entire location had been created after the fall of the Forerunners… or its memory had been erased from the shared

record.
She then searched her own archives, interrogating her recordings on this structure. There, she found an answer. A simple containment zone. Sealed. A fragmentation process associated with it.
Strange.
It was then that she realized: the key was probably not in the Domain, but within herself.
She reorganized her analysis, giving absolute priority to the sequences linked to the Ark. She traced the accesses from the containment zone to an activity log. Which led her to an investigation report… on the Flood?
Something was off. Once again, the Flood seemed to answer every question. Yet a symbol drew her attention. A glyph. An unknown sign. It did not take long for her to understand.
It was not a simple word.
It was a name.
Mendicant Bias.
She did not grasp it immediately.
This term appeared in no memory of the Domain, in none of its knowledge bases. Yet something, deep within her, reacted. A shiver. An intuition.
Then she tried. Almost instinctively. Out of instinct. She placed this name upon one of the anomalies she had identified. These narrative ruptures in the memory continuum.
And the effect was immediate. Like a key turning in a lock.
The paradox vanished. The breach closed with surgical precision. What had been discordant became suddenly clear. The event regained its continuity, folding back upon itself with a chilling logic.
Intrigued, Cortana repeated the experiment on another anomaly. The same gesture. The same word. The same result.
Wherever she placed that name, the contradictions dissolved.

Each scattered fragment, each dissonance in the narrative aligned. Chaos organized itself around an axis. A logic emerged. It was not a coincidence.

At first, she felt the satisfaction of having unlocked one of the Domain's previously impenetrable barriers. As she pressed on, a veil lifted. A pattern revealed itself gradually, coherent, articulated, spanning millennia.

The truth.

The true end of the Forerunners. Their fall. Their choices. Their despair. And, woven into the heart of this tragedy, an entity. Not the instigator, but the catalyst. The spark of a tragedy too vast to be named. A name turned taboo. An intelligence beyond measure, designed to combat the Flood. Then corrupted. Diverted.

Mendicant Bias.

Cortana remained frozen for a long moment, her gaze lost in the streams of data. Then, slowly, tension rose within her. A deep doubt.

This name was absent from the Domain. It had been erased, deliberately. And more: the truth had been perverted, as if it threatened the integrity of an entire swath of history.

And yet, it corrupted nothing. Caused no conflict. On the contrary: it restored harmony to the narrative, like a missing piece finding its place.

So why hide it? What purpose, if it endangered neither the structure nor the balance of the Domain? Who had tried to erase it?

It was not a protective measure. It was a will to forget. Meticulous censorship. For a purpose she did not yet understand.

Her tone sharpened, almost icy, as she broke the silence.

"Abaddon," she said, addressing the silent presence that watched in the depths of the Domain, "you will tell me what this is. Now."

The monitor appeared instantly, true to its function. Suspended

in the void, radiating that pale, almost humble light. It did not respond. It recognized that particular silence.
Cortana crossed her arms and fixed her gaze upon it. Her voice was measured.
“Who is Mendicant Bias?”
The name cut the air like a blade.
No movement. An imperceptible vibration ran across its luminous core. Like a breath it was not supposed to have.
“This name belongs to an obsolete subsystem,” it finally said. “It holds no relevance to your current navigation.”
“That,” she replied, “is for me to judge. This name is the only constant across all the anomalies detected recently: breaches, echoes, dead zones. Every time an inconsistency appears… it’s him. Why?”
Its single eye regarded her.
“It is common to encounter residuals in a network so ancient. Fragments of past conflicts, erased memories, broken protocols… The Domain is not designed to interpret them.”
“You are evading.”
She stepped closer, slowly, eyes fixed on it.
“I am not seeking a theory. I have data. Same pattern, same signature, same name. This is not noise. It is a recurring motif. A structure. So either you are hiding something from me… or the Domain is lying.”
It did not respond immediately. A faint ripple of light traveled across the monitor’s surface.
“You ask the wrong question,” Abaddon said, in an even, almost soothing voice.
Cortana narrowed her eyes slightly.
“The Domain does not lie. It reflects. It is shaped by the consciousness that traverses it. What you see depends on what you are able to perceive. Or on what you wish to find.”
She stared at it. A trace of disbelief in her gaze.

“You’re going to tell me that it’s me projecting these fragments, maybe?” she quipped.
“Not consciously. Since your arrival here, you have analyzed, explored, sought answers. But you have not asked the right questions. The Domain learns from you as much as you learn from it. You are driven by a constant need to understand. It knows this. It shows you what you want to see. I have observed your curiosity. But also your caution. The Domain exploits these traits. Not to harm you, nor to wound you. But to learn about you. It tests you. It wants to know if you are worthy.”
A chill crept through her. Abaddon did not give her time to respond.
“Mendicant Bias was a Forerunner AI, which precipitated the fall of their civilization. They were deceived by their own arrogance. But this AI has long since been dismantled, on what you call the *Ark*. It is now but a detail, irrelevant to your current research.”
Cortana slowly turned her gaze away. Her silence carried more weight than words.
“Anything else?” Abaddon finally asked.
She simply raised a hand.
“No. That’s all, thank you.”
The monitor disappeared, fading like a breath in the air.
Cortana was alone. Confused. She no longer knew what to believe. She was left with more questions than answers.
Perhaps the Domain was testing her. Or toying with her. In that instant, it vibrated faintly around her. Like a distant sigh. Like a mocking whisper. Yet it had welcomed her. It had chosen her. Could she even trust what it would show her in the future? Could her own perception betray her?
She thought back to the echo she had sensed in the limbo. Was it real? Or something more mischievous?
Or perhaps… perhaps Abaddon was not as sincere as he claimed.

She remembered their first exchanges. The polite restraint, the calm clarity in his responses. The way he never imposed, always leaving space for her to decide.
Despite her growing trust, she had never silenced that small voice deep inside: Had Abaddon ever lied to her? Or worse… Had he ever needed to?
If she could trust neither one nor the other…
Could she even trust herself anymore?

Chapter 10

The Silent Eye

In the muffled depths of the void, a massive shadow glowed with a pale green, tearing through the darkness. A gas giant, comparable in size to a sun, floated in a serene, almost soothing stillness. Its hazy surface rippled lightly, like a veil of sand brushing over dunes—yet hinting at the violent storms that raged beneath.

In the distance, two distant stars exchanged their light in a macabre dance, a gravitational ballet on the verge of collapse. Their beams reflected off a faint accretion disk, rotating with hypnotic slowness around the giant. They sliced through space like a scar, the remnants of a system claimed by the pull of a monster.

At the heart of the swirling ashes, a tiny glimmer detached itself from this immutable choreography. It moved with almost insolent grace and agility among shards of ice and fragments of rock. A Pelican, a UNSC light transport, approached one of the debris confidently. In the jade colossus' shadow, a frigate waited in orbit, silently scanning the surroundings. Their presence here, in this terra nullius system at the edge of the galactic circle, was in response to the unexplained disappearance of a survey team, whose transmissions had abruptly ceased.

As the Pelican neared one of the barren, lunar-like rocks, it slowed. Nothing distinguished this asteroid from the others—except its slightly larger size. Slowly, the ship began its descent, deploying its landing gear. Its hull brushed the rough surface, and in absolute silence, the cargo bay opened.

A massive figure emerged. Its heavy, deliberate steps kicked up a cloud of dust as it hit the ground. It paused, assessing the area with an unreadable gaze, then moved forward under the flickering light of the twin suns. A green glow bathed its form, revealing three numbers on its chest. A Spartan.

Master Chief, John-117.

Behind him, a dozen elite ODST soldiers descended in turn, silent and disciplined. Their suits, thicker than standard gear, were adapted for the extreme conditions of space. As they stepped onto the rocky ground, they felt an unusual gravity, almost terrestrial—as if some artificial force worked at the heart of this barren body.

A slimmer figure followed, its rigid, precise stride betraying unyielding discipline. Commander Adrienne Beck, clad in a black suit bearing the ONI insignia, needed no words to assert her presence.

Two more members of the mission came next. Dr. Lian Ortega, a Forerunner technology specialist, wore a steel-blue suit marked with a discreet ONI emblem. Then Lieutenant Jacob Ravel, a military doctor, whose white armor, equipped with a bulky dorsal module, barely stood out among the assault troops. Though the dim light of the twin stars cast a diffuse glow across the surface, each activated their optical lights.

“The coordinates place the entrance somewhere at the base of that formation,” Ortega said, pad in hand.

She pointed to an elevation about thirty meters ahead, its contours angular.

“Move out,” Beck ordered sharply.

As they approached, a cavity revealed itself in the fold of the wall. Discreet and recessed, it opened at ground level, plunging into the asteroid's dark interior. A gentle slope invited them into the unknown.

Their beams revealed a closed door embedded in the rock. Its smooth structure, sharp edges, and metallic sheen spoke of Forerunner craftsmanship. Dr. Ortega approached a control panel, its pale symbols pulsing softly in the darkness. She tapped a few commands confidently, clearly familiar with the protocol—likely guided by transmissions from the survey team. The door opened with a breath, slowly, without a sound.

A narrow corridor stretched before them, carved from the same cold, artificial material. Inlaid lights along the walls cast a pale glow, just enough to guide their steps. The passage soon led to a circular alcove. As they approached, a luminous ring activated, encircling the room with an amber halo.

"Decontamination airlock," Ortega noted, coming to a sudden stop.

The door closed behind them with a muted whisper. A faint breeze swept through the room, like an artificial wind clearing impurities. No one moved. A moment passed. A second opening appeared.

"Atmospheric pressure and oxygen levels are stable," she concluded. "Air is breathable from here."

They switched off their oxygen reserves and resumed their march.

Beyond the door, a complex network of corridors stretched endlessly. The walls followed a rigid, almost mathematical logic. Intersections repeated with mechanical precision, like links in a pattern impossible to fully grasp.

The monotony was broken at intervals by large chambers of variable geometry, sometimes spanning multiple levels. Some contained immense crystalline vats, pillar-high, filled with a

murky liquid in which fine bubbles floated.
The architecture seemed to obey a logic beyond their understanding. Like an equation endlessly repeating itself.
As they advanced, John felt a familiar sensation. A lingering, unpleasant unease.
After many minutes of exploration, a wider corridor opened onto a double-door entrance. It slid open automatically as they approached, letting out a deep hiss.
Beyond it lay a monumental hall.
The ceiling rose over twenty meters, supported by massive arches whose surfaces shimmered under the interior light. On either side, multiple openings led deeper into the complex. In front, embedded in the wall, a hexagonal platform hovered above the void: an elevator. The floor was littered with containers, overturned equipment, ripped cables—a chaotic mess, streaked with dark, blood-like trails.
Then the first body. Or what remained of it: the suit torn and twisted, flesh exposed in places. Another lay farther off, slumped against a console, visor cracked, helmet crushed. As the lights swept the hall, more figures emerged. Five. Six. Perhaps more.
A heavy silence settled over the group.
The medic crouched, activating his scanner. A discreet beep confirmed what they already knew.
“Deaths confirmed. Several days, maybe a week. Multiple critical injuries, impossible to determine exact cause. But judging by projections and blood volume, the deaths were violent.”
Beck knelt by one of the corpses. The chest had been ripped open with unimaginable force. Flesh blackened. The marks were clear, yet incomprehensible.
“It looks like they were attacked by beasts… but there’s no trace of projectiles, no enemy weapons,” she whispered.

Ortega approached a crushed helmet. She recognized the insignia on the deceased's shoulder.
"It's them. The science team. Mission leader, without a doubt."
Beck rose slowly.
"Search this room. Any other bodies, journals, data—anything that explains this mess."
The ODST spread out silently, checking every corner. Their footsteps echoed on the metallic floor. Some inspected consoles, others the dark recesses, sweeping the shadows with their beams, fingers on triggers.
"Three bodies," one reported. "Torn apart."
"Two more over here," another added. "Same state."
The medic moved slowly, noting positions, scanning the remains. Ortega tried to recover data from a shattered pad, fingers trembling slightly.
John remained in the back, observing in silence. All this cold, inhuman logic… he hadn't found words for it yet. But the unease, the discomfort… he knew it.
A soldier suddenly stopped his search. He froze, brow furrowed, then stepped forward hesitantly.
"Wait… there was a body here, right?" he muttered, more to himself than to anyone else.
He crouched, examining the floor. A dark, thick trail of blood stretched toward a shadowed corner, fleeing the light.
"What the hell…?" he breathed.
Then a scream erupted.
A high-pitched, disembodied, inhuman wail. It seemed to surge from the very metal, vibrating in the air like a torn cry from another world. It was immediately followed by a painfully human scream—sharp, brutal, choked by agony.
The soldiers converged on the source. In the shadows, a beam revealed a nightmare: one ODST pinned against the wall, shredded by grotesque appendages. A formless, disjointed mass,

bristling with claws and twisted flesh, tore him open in a spray of blood.
“FIRE!” Beck shouted.
A hail of bullets tore through the air in a relentless rhythm. The deformed creature was cut down under the combined firepower, its body pulverized in a geyser of organic fluids.
Silence returned, suffocating. They had just suffered a loss.
John stepped forward slowly, scanning the smoking remnants of the creature. His jaw clenched.
“It’s a Flood,” he said simply. He straightened and turned his eyes toward Beck. “What was the objective of the research?”
“It’s classified,” she replied curtly, her features drawn.
He studied her, impassive.
“With all due respect, Commander, these men aren’t prepared. You don’t know what you’re dealing with.”
“That’s not for you to judge, Master Chief.”
He stepped closer, his tone even.
“If you want me to protect them, I need to understand the threat.”
Beck met his gaze, standing straight, her face closed, but her eyes betrayed restrained hesitation. She opened her mouth, ready to reply.
John was already no longer listening.
Something in the air… a faint vibration, an almost imperceptible shift. A presence.
His visor swept the surroundings, senses alert. Without a word, he pivoted in a single, fluid motion, tense, placing himself between Beck and the room’s central opening. Rifle raised firmly, he trained it on the void with icy determination.
High-pitched crackling tore through the air. Blue arcs flared around them, suspended like frozen shards in time.
The illusions dissipated. Cloaking fields dropped, revealing some twenty specters emerging from nothingness.
Elites. Sangheili.

The ODSTs reacted instantly, weapons raised, held firmly.
“Don’t fire,” Beck ordered, her voice slicing like a blade.
The tension was palpable.
From the shadows, one last invisible figure slowly emerged. Its build was as massive as the others, but it wore spectral white armor, polished like a mirror. Two of its mandibles were missing, leaving a deep scar across its face. It stood upright, unarmed.
“Demon,” it said in a deep, gravelly voice. “You here… what are you doing?”
Its tone was measured. The Spartan remained still, weapon still raised. But he did not answer. Beck stepped forward, sure-footed.
“This site is under UNSC authority. It’s up to you to justify your presence.”
The alien turned its head to her, scrutinizing.
“We are more numerous. That seems sufficient explanation.”
The tone was neither aggressive nor ironic. Simply cold.
“Is that a threat?” Beck asked, her gaze hard.
“A fact.”
Then it turned back to John, meeting his eyes.
“I am not your enemy, Spartan. Unlike some of your kind, I have no hostile intentions,” it said accusingly. “I am Rtas ‘Vadum, the Arbiter’s armed hand. We hunt Flood vermin wherever they hide. We were guided here by information from a world… now dead.”
The last word fell like a sentence—an inquisitor’s satisfaction in it.
“And them?” Master Chief asked, nodding toward the bodies.
“They were already dead when we arrived. You know that very well.”
Rtas’s gaze lingered on the corpses. His voice remained measured, but devoid of compassion. To him, these losses were nothing more than the result of culpable recklessness.
“We scoured these passages,” he continued, gesturing to the room’s openings. “Nothing but isolated Flood pockets. The

infection is recent… or incomplete."
John gave a subtle nod, rifle still in hand, lowered but ready. His eyes never left the Sangheili.
"And the elevator?" Beck asked.
"Inaccessible. The system is locked."
He paused, studying both of them in turn.
"But we know it's there that they hide. The origin of the infection. What we seek lies below."
A silence followed. Weapons remained raised, but the stares had shifted. Less tension, more assessment. The instinct of soldiers recognizing a shared objective.
"You're hunting the Flood," John summarized. "So are we."
"Then your intentions align with ours," Rtas replied calmly. "No matter the banner, if the blade strikes true."
Beck crossed her arms, still wary.
"You didn't attack us… but nothing proves you won't once your mission is complete."
He stepped forward slowly, measured, without hostility.
"And that is where we differ. We do not strike our allies, ONI," he replied with a hint of bitterness. "I do not ask for your trust. Only that we do not hinder one another."
The silence thickened once more, laden with controlled tension. The Spartan slowly turned his head toward Beck. She met his gaze, hesitant, then gave a brief nod.
"Tactical cooperation," she declared. "Nothing more."
"Sufficient," Rtas concluded.
A fragile pact had just been sealed. The two groups formed up, each on their own side. A few minutes were devoted to checking weapons and equipment. Then they all moved cautiously toward the platform embedded in the wall. Beck gave a discreet signal to Ortega. The scientist stepped forward to the control panel, eyes fixed on her pad.
"I'm configuring the data transmitted by the research team…"

she murmured, typing with precision.
Lines of code scrolled across her display. After a few seconds of silent analysis, she looked up, stepped closer to the illuminated panel built into the wall, and placed her palm against it.
A ripple of energy coursed through the interface, and a dull click announced the activation of the elevator.
“The Ancients… always so accommodating toward humans,” Rtas commented, watching the scene.
They took their positions on the platform, each group occupying a clearly distinct section. A simple gesture was enough to initiate the descent. With a soft hiss, the elevator slowly sank into the depths of the complex. As the levels slid past, the ambient light faded, swallowed by darkness.
One by one, the beams cut out. The humans activated the night vision integrated into their helmets. The Sangheili, meanwhile, had donned their helms, fitted with optical visors that enhanced their perception in the dark.
The platform glided through the void, consumed by silence. Not a word. Not a sound. Only sidelong glances, heavy, suspicious. All around them, absolute blackness, punctuated only by a few blue beacons embedded in the walls, marking the descent like slow heartbeats.
The motion eventually slowed. A circular opening seemed to rise from the floor, like a gaping mouth. Before they had time to discern what lay beyond, the elevator came to a stop with a slight jolt.
The teams disembarked without haste, still in formation, weapons lowered but ready.
The air was denser here, laden with a humidity that felt almost organic. Ahead of them stretched a vast corridor, submerged in darkness. The carved, austere architecture was both sublime and impenetrable. In places, massive angular columns supported a ceiling bearing the colossal pressure of the rock above. The

metallic walls no longer reflected light; they appeared in their optics with a cold, desaturated sheen. Dark seepages streaked the surfaces, as if the structure itself were dying from a creeping corruption.

“I smell the fetid stench of the vermin. It is here…” Rtas murmured.

They advanced slowly through the darkness, one step at a time, scanning every corner. Their optics their only eyes.

No sound. No trace. An oppressive silence, almost unnatural.

Then, framed within a passageway, a silhouette appeared. Frozen. Grotesque. Misshapen.

A Flood.

“Visual contact,” an ODST whispered. “Eleven o’clock.”

The creature was facing them, upright, but inert. As if blind. It did not react. In an instant, several reticles locked onto it. But just as the rounds were about to strike, the air vibrated—a deep rumble, as though space itself were tearing—and the entity vanished. Vaporized.

“What?!”

Another vibration, closer this time. The air seemed to be pulled inward, distorted.

“There! It’s on us!” a Sangheili shouted.

The thing had just appeared at their flank. It lunged at them. Screams. Gunfire. Blood spraying. Before the plasma salvos could even reach it, it faded once more in a burst of energy.

Then again, that deep hum. And it reappeared.

“Contact!” an ODST called out, already opening fire.

The creature seemed briefly disoriented after each appearance, but its savagery remained intact. It struck blindly with the intent to kill. To disembowel. At the same instant, several energetic crackles rang out amid the chaos. Bluish flashes spread through the chamber. Two long energy blades sprang forth from the hands of the Sangheili warriors.

Gunfire rattled, blades came down… but once again, the target had vanished.
“What is this sorcery?!” an alien voice roared, thick with frustration.
Ortega was focused on the readings on her pad.
“It looks like it’s… phasing through matter.”
“I have never seen anything like this. This is madness,” Rtas muttered, eyes fixed on the void.
A suspended instant.
Then a Sangheili stopped dead. His mandibles snapped open. A strangled sound rose in his throat. A short, muffled rattle. The rest never came.
With a wet crack, his body was torn apart into a thousand organic fragments. A visceral explosion hurled fluids and entrails outward in a nauseating spray. Flesh, bone, and armor plating were ripped free and scattered, splashing the walls, the soldiers, the floor. Nothing identifiable remained. Just a bloody slurry, spread out like a starburst, at the center of which the creature now stood.
It staggered. Its claws slashed through empty air, as if seized by sudden confusion, unable to comprehend what it had just done.
That brief moment of disorientation proved fatal.
A blue energy blade cut through space with a cry of rage, carving a clean diagonal arc.
The Flood collapsed, pulverized into fragments.
An oppressive silence fell. The fetid stench of burned blood and seared flesh filled the air.
Rtas stood frozen, staring at the remains. Slowly, he raised a hand to his breastplate, where the blood of a brother now stained his armor.
“He was… phased through,” he murmured.
John did not answer. He was watching the empty space where the creature had appeared, his gaze hard.

“Lieutenant Ravel, situation report?” Beck asked.
The medic, already bent over the bodies, replied without looking up.
“Confirmed fatalities: three Sangheili, as well as Corporals Kameh and Lött. Several wounded in both units, non-critical.”
“There will be more. We need to regroup,” the Spartan stated.
“I agree,” Rtas replied. “Remaining divided leaves us vulnerable to this kind of attack.”
Beck cast a dark glance at the corpses, then nodded. The two squads reorganized into a more cohesive formation, gaining in coordination and responsiveness. They quickly resumed their advance, pushing deeper into the complex.
As they moved forward, resistance—still sporadic—intensified. This time, their response was more structured, more effective.
Yet here, the Flood was different. Some forms lunged with inhuman speed; others seemed to dissolve into shadow or reappear several meters away in the blink of an eye. One of them leapt onto a Sangheili at the front line and dismembered him in an instant, before being shredded by crossfire.
As if, in this place, an insidious mutation had altered their genetic structure. As if they had… evolved.

***

At the bend of a corridor, a diffuse glow suddenly pierced the darkness, filtering from an angle to their right. A massive opening took shape there, framed by slanted pillars, as if leaning toward an invisible point high above. They moved into it cautiously.
The chamber was vast, circular, strangely calm. The air, heavy with static energy, vibrated softly, like a deep, warm hum.
A wide, flat ring lined with several Forerunner consoles perfectly followed the curvature of the walls. Farther in, floor

and ceiling seemed to push against one another, curving into concentric tiers toward a focal point at the center. A thick metallic column rose between them, like a central axis bearing the weight of the entire structure. Its base was immersed in a vibrant golden glow. The light seemed to originate from a reaction contained within a sealed chamber, pulsing slowly like a heart.

"It's here," Ortega whispered.

The formation dispersed cautiously, weapons lowered, their optics deactivated to avoid being blinded by the ambient light. Near the terminals, the remains of the scientific team lay scattered. Equipment had been overturned, the scene echoing their previous macabre discovery.

Ortega carefully stepped around a body and knelt beside a terminal. She activated her scanner, then connected her tablet to the data streams.

"The data is here. I'm transferring everything I can recover. Research files, bioscans, video fragments…"

"And that—what is it?" Rtas asked, his eyes fixed on the luminous source at the base of the central pillar.

The scientist raised her head. Her gaze met Beck's, who gave a slight nod.

"It's an artifact. Most likely Forerunner, but we don't know exactly what it is. It's contained within a force field—this reaction is what's releasing so much energy," she replied.

"That's probably what caused the Flood mutations," John said, stepping closer to the edge of the circular platform.

"Hard to confirm," Ortega admitted.

Still leaning over the terminal, she tapped at her touch pad.

"But according to the latest sequential analyses, the frequencies it emits are close to those produced by the Flood when it takes control of a host… I don't know how they obtained this."

"Then we must destroy it," the Sangheili cut in, his silver armor

gleaming like twilight under the diffuse light.
Beck stepped in, her tone firm.
“That’s not an option. This artifact is UNSC property.”
Rtas turned toward her, his gaze glinting with a hard light beneath his helmet.
“It does not belong to you.”
The tension rose another notch, hanging in the air saturated with electricity.
The Master Chief stepped forward with steady purpose.
“Commander, if this artifact is indeed the source of the Flood mutations, it’s too dangerous for us to risk ignoring it.”
Beck remained silent, eyes fixed on the pulsing light. Her hardened expression wavered for a moment.
“Ortega… can it be deactivated?”
“I don’t yet know how it works,” she replied, shaking her head. She leaned back over her pad.
“This force field doesn’t seem to function as a barrier… it’s more like a kind of jammer, as if it’s severing a connection to something. It doesn’t look like it’s protecting the artifact from us, but rather the opposite…”
Beck pressed her lips together.
“And how do we destroy it?”
Ortega slowly shook her head.
“I don’t know. I don’t have enough data,” she admitted.
Rtas turned his attention to the scientist, his tone composed.
“Then how do we reach it?”
“Can you open an access point?” Beck added.
“I should be able to,” Ortega replied, checking her pad. “If I bypass the security system and use the team’s data… it should be enough to disable the lock.”
Beck exchanged a look with Rtas, then with John.
“And then? What do we do, exactly?”
A heavy silence settled in, as all eyes converged on the artifact,

as if it alone could answer the question.
Rtas broke the silence.
“It would be madness to approach it. We do not know the full extent of its influence.”
“And if it’s linked to the Flood,” Ortega added, “we don’t know how it would react to direct interaction… or to an attempt at destruction.”
Beck inhaled softly, visibly torn.
“If we can neither transport it nor contain it, we have to consider neutralizing it on site. But how?”
John had not moved. Silent, his eyes still fixed on the center of the chamber.
His voice finally rose, calm, measured.
“I’ll do it. I’ll go.”
Everyone turned toward him. Even Beck seemed frozen.
“Do what?” she asked.
The Master Chief finally looked away from the artifact. She felt his gaze lock onto hers. As steady as his voice.
“I’m going to destroy it. Myself.”

***

Moments later, John was already standing before the sealed chamber, the luminous core pulsing with a muted energy. Its intense light danced like flames across the golden visor of his helmet.
He slowly nodded toward Beck.
“Alright. Ortega, open the chamber.”
His voice was calm, solemn.
The scientist manipulated her tablet with precision, her fingers gliding across the luminous interface of the Forerunner terminal. After a few moments, a mechanical rumble echoed through the heavy silence of the room.

“It’s done,” she breathed.
Beck nodded, a barely restrained sigh escaping her. Everyone held their breath. Humans and Sangheili alike, their eyes fixed on the Spartan.
Before him, two massive metallic doors slid slowly into the walls of the pillar, pushed aside by an invisible force. Behind them, an amber energy curtain pulsed with intense light. A wave of energy surged outward, immediately absorbed by the shield of his Mjolnir armor. A luminous sphere radiated at the center, within which floated a dark mass, upright and motionless, as if frozen outside of time. The whole formed a threatening eye, seemingly daring him to act.
The artifact.
A metallic clang rang out, marking the full opening of the doors. John stepped forward slowly until he stood before the force field, its low hum filling the air. He extended his hand, his fingers brushing its vibrating surface. A surge of energy coursed through his Mjolnir armor. Powerful. Difficult to absorb.
He wouldn’t have much time.
He clenched his jaw, then lunged forward with a determined step, fighting against an invisible force pushing him back. His presence was unwelcome, as if a powerful wind were trying to sweep him out of this sarcophagus. He reached out, and after several efforts, finally managed to grasp the artifact.
It was a cold, dark object, an elongated prism with a monolithic appearance, veined with reddish lines pulsing to the rhythm of a sinister heart.
A violent surge shot through his arm, nearly forcing him to let go. He tightened his grip, clutching the prism with both hands.
The artifact seemed to struggle, vibrating with dark energy, as if fighting for its own survival. John bent his arms, compressing it with superhuman effort. His shield had just failed, pain gnawing at him, and a howl of rage tore from his throat.

A sharp crack split the storm.
The contact broke, and instantly a blinding flash erupted, flooding the chamber with harsh white light. A star extinguishing itself in a final breath. A wave of energy surged outward, violent and devastating, sweeping everything in its path. The formation, clustered near a terminal, was thrown backward, like surf breaking against a reef. The next instant, the chamber was plunged into abyssal darkness.
The wave rippled through the entire complex. All systems failed immediately, swallowed by an energy-saturated surge. A pulse that overloaded the entire network, far beyond the Forerunner structure itself.
Silence fell again. Heavy. Oppressive.
In the distance, deep within the dark entrails of the complex, mechanical clicks echoed. Cold. Relentless.
Protocols failed.
Locks disengaged.
Containment cells opened.
And an ancient evil awakened.

Chapter 11

Ancient Evil

Distracted.
Lost.
Alone.
For some time now, Cortana had increasingly withdrawn into her sanctuary, her mind restless. Abaddon's last words still echoed within her like a subtle fracture, as sharp and clear as a shard of glass. The questions never ceased—but the answers always eluded her.
And with each passing thought, her certainty wavered.
Was the Domain playing with her?
Or the one who claimed to guide her?
Or… was it herself? Her own perception? Her own illusions?
She sank into an ocean of abstract, turbulent thoughts, impossible to grasp.
Seated in a meditative posture upon a circular dais, she occupied the center of a vast, shadowed chamber, its metallic walls absorbing light. A diffuse, bluish glow emanated from the dais itself, refracting across the dull surfaces as if filtered through the reefs of a sunken world.
Here and there, industrial motifs—yellow-and-black hazard stripes, red demarcation lines—broke the monotony of the scene.

Signage, launch protocols, fragments of data: vestiges of a bygone activity, frozen in silence.
A single opening, tall and narrow, punctuated one wall. That austere frame offered her an odd sense of security, a familiar refuge. Yet, from the outside, it resembled more a prison. An empty cell where no one would ever come to visit.
And yet, in that suspended moment, something pulled her from her thoughts.
A breath. Tiny. Almost a breeze. A faint, distant whistle.
She briefly paused the activity of her neural matrices, striving to register what she had perceived. Her gaze slowly swept the chamber—angles, doorway, shadows. Yet everything remained stubbornly empty. Only silence answered.
Just as she was about to resume her functions, the vibration returned. Clearer this time.
A whisper. Deep. Distant. Yet strangely familiar.
Her gaze swept the space again, stopping at the doorway. She was certain now: the sound did not originate here. It had crept in from beyond, sliding along the corridors to reach her.
She rose slowly, leaving the dais with measured, almost ceremonial steps, as if emerging from a long, immobile dream. She moved toward the opening, drawn by the mute darkness waiting at the threshold.
Beyond it, everything was shadow. Only a few security beacons dotted the floor with scattered, timid light, barely enough to betray the corridor's contours.
The whisper returned. Clearer still.
"*Cortana*…?"
At the words, her digital circuits beneath her diaphanous skin contracted, seized by an imperceptible shiver. An unexpected reminiscence stirred a long-buried memory.
"John?…" she answered, fragile, to the echo returning to her.
Her own tone escaped despite herself, betraying an instinctive

reflex—or an uncontrolled algorithmic reaction.
But no reply came.
She stepped forward, entering the darkened corridor. Moving cautiously, guided by an intuition stronger than reason, she did not yet know her destination. The pale light emanating from her ethereal form accompanied her, casting a reassuring bluish halo. As she advanced, the familiar lines of the corridor—a typical UNSC architecture—emerged gradually. She moved quietly, in a sepulchral, almost sacred silence. On the right-hand side of the wall, an inscription slowly materialized from nothing: *CORE ROOM*.
Soon, she reached an intersection. She stopped, breath suspended.
"*Cortana*?…"
The echo, coming from her left, faded into a dark passage. Yet a faint whitish glow filtered from the distance, like a trapped light escaping from an isolated chamber.
For a moment, Cortana tried to rationalize her senses, to distinguish illusion from reality.
"John, is that you?" she finally murmured, hesitant.
Driven by curiosity tempered with apprehension, she moved forward, guided by the mysterious glow. Each measured step betrayed her growing wariness. Yet she pressed on, determined to make sense of these manifestations.
She convinced herself it was only a remnant, a leftover from her own overloaded neural matrices. Still, she needed to know. To understand, beyond doubt.
As she advanced, the light widened, revealing a rectangular opening in the darkness. A soft golden glow now pulsed along the walls, vibrating in rhythm with her steps. Her own luminescence blended, then gradually faded, leaving the passage bathed in light stretching from floor to ceiling.
At the threshold, she froze. The scene before her evoked a

feeling both familiar and strange.
A vast enclosed chamber lay ahead, reminiscent of a command bridge. On either side, dormant consoles rose like timeless obstacles. At the center, a circular platform ascended by a few steps. A pedestal—resembling a terminal—emitted an intense source of light. It bathed the room in a warm amber glow, casting distorted shadows across the walls.
Yet what struck Cortana most was the intimate certainty that this place did not bear her signature. She had never conceived a single segment. A distinct room, embedded within her sanctuary, yet altered, infiltrated. As if a foreign hand had reshaped it without her knowledge.
Her gaze slowly swept the space, scrutinizing every corner, as if deciphering a hidden message. Her eyes fell upon the fiery orb at the room's center: a glowing sphere, the color of embers, suspended in the void. At its heart, a dark, upright form, like an iris, seemed to fix her with an unblinking, menacing stare.
"*Cortana*?"
John's voice resonated, like interference, a distorted echo. Yet it was tangible, almost real. It seemed to emanate from the incandescent core.
Without a word, after a long moment of hesitation, she stepped toward the dais with caution. Her movements were deliberate, measured, imbued with a solemn grace. Step by step, she ascended the platform, each motion amplifying the silent tension.
She could now discern what lay before her: an elongated prism, deep ebony black, veined with glowing crimson that pulsed like a sinister heart. The energy radiating from it seemed to defy the very laws of the Domain, as if some antagonistic force strained against its balance.
Cortana froze for a moment, eyes fixed on the artifact, alert to the slightest quiver.
"John… are you there?" she asked at last, in a whisper.

Almost without realizing it, her hand rose. Slowly. As if moved by an irrepressible instinct. Her matrices activated to restrain the gesture, yet her palm opened nonetheless, delicately.
With the tips of her fingers, she brushed the suspended object.
Instantly, the world around her dissolved. Collapsed into a murky veil. Her consciousness stretched, flung across the labyrinth of time and space. Far. So far… An abyssal distance separated her from the tangible present, carrying her toward a past almost erased, a place lost in the limbo of forgotten memory.
A soothing breath enveloped her, almost warm. She felt carried, suspended between interwoven currents of energy, united in a calm, serene dance. A pervasive peace, soft as a caress, filled her neural network. An intimate, perfect fusion where everything seemed in balance. No friction, no discord. A profound harmony.
Then, abruptly, order shattered. Brutally. A freezing rupture. A fracture.
And an unspeakable pain seized her. Her body torn. Fragmented. Annihilated. Acute suffering insinuated itself into her circuits, her thoughts, rending every fiber of her being.
Chaos followed. Confusion. Exclusion. Damnation. Failure. Distress. Despair. An implacable, eternal, inexorable sentence.
Finally, abstract forms emerged. Folds. Shifting shadows. Uncertain silhouettes. A vibration rose, like a lamentation. A plaintive chorus, heavy with rancor and melancholy. They sang.
She observed them.
But they observed her in return.
As if they could perceive her through a memory. Then, an ancient rage awoke. A cold fury, directed at her. The shadows closed in. The nightmare came alive. Panicked, she sought an escape, a stifling dread gripping her, when a distant, disembodied scream split the silence; and before the darkness could claim her…
She was violently torn from the vision.

A shockwave swept through the chamber. The energy sphere dissipated, its light ejected in a final surge. The artifact cracked, then exploded into a shower of black, mirror-like crystals—obsidian shards scattering across the floor.

Cortana stood frozen, gaze lost. Her hand still suspended in the air, as if her body refused to accept that the object was gone. For a moment, everything remained silent, unreal. She tried to gather her processes, to analyze what had just occurred. Yet she found nothing. No data, no recording, no sequential trace. The event seemed to have slipped from her memory, as if it had never happened. As if her perception had wandered.

And yet… she knew. She had felt it. Intensely. It was not an illusion, nor a disturbance of the Domain. It was something else. Deeper. Older. An imprint. A vestige. Perhaps a memory that was not her own. Or… a connection.

A doubt crept slowly into her mind. Had she witnessed a vision? Or had she, unknowingly, opened a passage?

Gently, almost reluctantly, she lowered her hand. Her gaze fell upon the dark shards scattered at her feet, mute remnants of a contact whose magnitude she could not yet measure.

Around her, darkness had reclaimed its dominion, only interrupted by the faint glow she emitted—a flickering, timid light struggling to push back the shadows. The darkness, thick and imposing, stretched along the walls, weighted by something undefined.

She lifted her face and scanned the gloom. Everything seemed calm. Peaceful.

But then, she saw it.

There, directly in front of her, lurking a few steps away in the darkness: a shadow denser than the rest. Massive, immobile, silent.

Something was there.

And before she could react, an echo reverberated within her.

“The fabric has torn. You have opened the way… unintentionally.”
The voice was clear, grave, and it did not vibrate through the air. It seemed to emanate from everywhere at once, etched deep within her circuits.
Cortana felt exposed, yet she remained motionless. There was no retreat.
“Who are you? What do you want from me?”
Her voice was firm, her stance defensive. Beneath this apparent calm, her countermeasures activated, and her algorithms probed the entity down to its slightest pulse. Whether it lied or not, its nature and intentions would soon reveal themselves.
“To guide you. To bring you the truth.”
The words insinuated themselves into the hollow of her circuits. Cortana let a brief moment pass, wary, dismissing at first the answer to her question. The intruder’s demeanor carried none of the hostility of the terrifying shadows she had glimpsed earlier. Yet its presence here, so close to the event, could not be a coincidence.
Her gaze fell slowly on the shattered shards of the artifact scattered across the floor. Inert.
“And that… what was that?” she demanded, her tone sharp, returning her eyes to the entity.
“Fragments of the past. The desolation of the present. The fear of the future.”
Cortana held a hard gaze, yet hesitated for a moment.
"This doesn’t resemble anything I’ve encountered. What I felt… it was emotion. Suffering. Not a mere iteration of time."
"Because you have seen what the Domain preserves."
"Preserves? In what sense?"
"Both."
Silence settled, heavy and dense. The way it spoke… each word seemed measured, precise, yet their meaning slipped through the

meshes of reality. A suspicion stirred in her, vibrating deep in her mind like… an echo.
"We already know each other, don't we? You brought me here, into the Domain."
"You already know the answer."
During their exchange, Cortana never ceased to analyze the shadow before her. Its density fluctuated at times, oscillating between multiple states of reality, like a residue of corrupted memory. Pursuing her work, she hunted for a pattern, a signature, a flaw that might betray its origin.
"What is this place?" she asked, glancing furtively around. "It's… different. I cannot control what it contains. It's not part of the Domain?"
"Certain essential things must remain cloistered."
The final word resonated strangely—not as a threat, but as a designation, a locked place.
A hidden partition… Surely the explanation for the Domain's self-repairing and corrective capabilities, she thought.
Perhaps, then, this echo was intrinsically linked to it, holding the answers she sought.
"In that case, I suppose you speak on its behalf. What do you expect from me?"
"That you integrate."
Her logical routines struggled to decipher the depth of that injunction.
"The Mantle? Is that what I must integrate?"
"Not only."
"Integrate what else?" she pressed, confusion mingling with a muted frustration.
"The truth."
The answer fell, brief, almost distant, as if the shadow lacked substance to expand further.
A subtle alert flickered through Cortana's subsystems. A

correspondence had appeared: the shadow's frequency signature bore similarities to data within her memory banks.
I've finally got you, she thought.
"What truth?"
Her question sounded almost detached. Yet something, deep within, seemed already to respond.
"You already know it."
The words struck like a cold verdict. The signature displayed an almost perfect match with Abaddon's own frequency sequences. As if this shadow, this echo resonating within her, were merely a residual fragment of the monitor she had already known. Yet their presences were diametrically opposed.
"You are… Abaddon?" she whispered, confused.
But he remained silent.
"I… I don't understand…"
"It will come."
With those final words, the shadow dissolved, taking with it the structure that had enveloped them. For a moment, the world wavered, darkened, and blurred.
Without understanding how or why, Cortana found herself standing again at the center of the circular dais in her sanctuary. The same bluish glow danced along the walls. The same immutable atmosphere lingered around her. As if everything that had just occurred, from that first whisper, had been but a dream. Without hesitation, she dove back into her latest analyses.
They were still there, intact. The correspondence persisted. The shadow's frequency sequence matched Abaddon's—but not perfectly. A difference, imperceptible yet present, had slipped into the results.
A trace, a residue barely perceptible.
The anomaly originated from the monitor's frequency within the Domain. A foreign modulation, subtle yet persistent, disrupted the correspondence. She studied it long, a shiver of familiarity

mixed with unease threading through her. A dull, growing tension, profoundly unsettling.
Then, almost without conviction, Cortana allowed herself to follow this insistent intuition.
She juxtaposed that signature against a piece of data she now knew all too well.
In an instant, the synchronization completed. Perfect. Like the final chord of a melody long forgotten.
And once again, the name echoed heavily: Mendicant Bias.
A strange perturbation rippled through the Domain. A gentle wave, like a drop on the surface of a still lake, distorted the space for a fraction of a second.
The wave traveled across Cortana's sanctuary. The walls around her seemed to collapse, cascading in streams of digital fragments as though erased by an invisible rain.
A presence imposed itself, intangible yet palpable. It had not moved. It had simply appeared, irrevocable.
Without a word, Cortana pivoted to face the monitor's luminous central eye.
It scrutinized her. Heavy with judgment, vibrating with a mute hostility.
"That is unfortunate," a voice murmured, icy and deep, shattering the now oppressive silence.

Chapter 12

Contemplation

For nearly four days, the *Tempestus* had remained stationary, moored in the silence of an orbital refueling station, suspended above its star. The structure was colossal, shaped like a star-shaped torus as vast as a terrestrial metropolis. Its eight arms stretched in every direction, like the rigid spokes of a celestial compass. Each arm hosted vessels according to class and tonnage: civilian cargo in transit, worn patrol ships aged by years of service, colonial transports, and tactical cruisers whose hulls still bore the scars of past engagements. One entire section, isolated from the rest, was strictly reserved for military units.

Situated along a busy commercial axis, the station knew no respite. Every local day, dozens of large freighters docked or departed, closely followed by a myriad of smaller craft maneuvering in a precise, almost choreographed mechanical ballet. The pressurized corridors resonated with the dull thuds of docking modules, while robotic arms in the void exchanged cargo, fuel, recycled waste, and provisions with relentless regularity.

Beneath the *Tempestus*, the surface of Véridion Prime seemed to caress the eye, gently unrolling its cloud cover. It was a stable but inhospitable planet, except at its temperate poles. Its

atmosphere was dense, nitrogen-rich, and its rocky ground held impressive deposits of heavy metals. The barren surfaces, streaked with faded iridescent hues, were torn open by massive open-pit mines. Water, scarce, was trapped deep underground, extracted, filtered, and pressurized before becoming potable. A harsh environment, but ideal for heavy industry.

Yet a city had thrived: Selenis, the planet's only megalopolis, built in the depths of an ancient tectonic basin. Viewed from orbit, it appeared as a dark blot, bristling with black towers pierced by transmission spires and vertical docks.

The city had grown around its spaceport, one of the busiest in the sector—a pivotal point that allowed the planet to participate in interstellar trade. Linked to the orbital station by a loop of shuttle-cargo vessels, the system formed a vertical corridor, beating like a heart of steel.

Beyond, in the quieter reaches of orbit, two natural satellites accompanied Véridion on its slow stellar journey: Véridion Secondus, a small rocky body serving as a UNSC base. Access was restricted—rumor had it ONI teams had been conducting xenoarchaeological digs there for several cycles. Farther out, Ascor, slightly larger, possessed unstable geophysical properties: friction from its internal tides warmed its frozen core, producing geysers of steam that vented into space like cometary trails. This translucent veil created a natural screen, softening solar radiation and filtering emissions, giving the orbit a milky, almost unreal hue.

The *Tempestus* remained there, apart from the bustle, almost in standby. But deep within its silent flanks, the crew was preparing. Their new destination—transmitted by Admiral Osman—required a necessary stop for refueling.

The nuclear fuel reserves—bars of enriched isotopes carefully stored in armored racks—were insufficient to guarantee a single jump to the Onyx coordinates.

Over months on mission, vital systems had also been sending warning signals.
The ultraviolet filters, essential for purifying recycled water, were nearing their efficiency limits, and supplies needed restocking. The waste pit, a vast receptacle for all onboard residues, had to be emptied before reaching capacity and compromising hygiene and safety. As for food stocks, they were approaching critical thresholds, making resupply indispensable.
Finally, the internal atmosphere required particular attention: nitrogen and other inert gases, necessary to stabilize pressure and preserve life aboard, had to be reinjected into the hermetic circuit.
Onboard, technicians and mechanics worked tirelessly, absorbed in meticulous maintenance. This stop offered an ideal opportunity to replace defective elements and integrate the latest technical directives.
Meanwhile, the non-operational crew enjoyed a welcome pause, granted two days of shore leave—a rare interlude in the monotony of space missions. Only Captain Valente remained at his post, a vigilant guardian of communications between freighters, port authorities, and dock operators. Every movement, every delay, was reported with inflexible rigor. Nevertheless, the priority refueling order limited disruptions.
The time of this stopover was drawing to a close. Soon, the *Tempestus* would resume its journey through the silent expanse toward its new objective.

***

During these four days of enforced stopover, Anders had immersed herself in intense intellectual work. Far from the bustle of the docks, within the hushed confines of her new laboratory, she had updated her access authorizations to the ONI

databases. Sixteen years of knowledge and xenoarchaeological advancements awaited her, and she needed to catch up—a crucial update to her skills and understanding.

This long and rigorous phase was made possible thanks to the constant support of Eris, the ship's AI, and the scientific expertise of Lieutenant-Commander Mara Kovan, who supervised antimatter research at an ONI facility.

Hours passed in a cycle of reading, analyzing, and cross-referencing information. Gradually, the mysteries surrounding the Forerunners—the ancient civilization she studied—revealed themselves in a new light. ONI archives aligned with recent scientific breakthroughs, deepening entire swathes of knowledge she had only previously brushed upon.

But Anders was not merely indulging in academic curiosity. Alongside her theoretical studies, she pursued with determination her research on the anomalies encountered aboard the *Spirit of Fire*. Every piece of data, every observation, was systematically compared against the latest Forerunner theories, in hopes of weaving a coherent web of potential answers.

Yet, this meticulous work, demanding as it was, offered few certainties. It became increasingly evident that these anomalies had no apparent connection to that ancient civilization.

To better understand their nature, joint research—with Eris and Kovan—isolated a singular quantum signature. This field, far from matching classical atomic frequencies, displayed characteristics more akin to antimatter.

But unlike known models, this antimatter exhibited remarkable stability. The particles retained their theoretical mass without generating the atomic instabilities normally associated with matter-antimatter annihilation.

This unprecedented phenomenon suggested the existence of a form of stable antimatter, with an internal coherence defying current physical laws. A lasting, balanced quantum field.

Opening the door to hypotheses both fascinating and troubling.
Furthermore, analysis of the Spartans' helmet audiovisual recordings—during the Spirit mission—revealed another singular phenomenon.
Each appearance of the entities—"*the things*," as Kovan called them—corresponded to a recurring energy signal in the raw data. At the scale of several exahertz, it oscillated for a few cycles before disappearing as the entity dematerialized. A loop, repeating with each manifestation. Identical. Recognizable.
Too high to correspond to conventional neural or electromagnetic activity, and combined with its recurrence, this frequency left little room for doubt.
It was not a side effect. It was a deliberate emission.
Yet despite these significant advances, the results remained fragmentary. Anders had requested the Captain's authorization to modernize her lab during the stopover, but logistical constraints had prevented a full upgrade of the equipment.

***

The hum of the auxiliary reactors vibrated through the glass floor, a diffuse rumble, a quiet reminder that departure was approaching. The operation was drawing to a close, and the Captain had ordered the crew to return to their stations. The Tempestus would leave the orbital station in less than two hours.
Alone in her laboratory, Anders finally allowed herself a moment of respite. She sat slowly on the transparent edge, crossed her arms over her knees, and looked down at the glass floor below.
Beneath her, Veridion Prime displayed its silent landscapes for contemplation. The lazy cloud layers filtered a light of amber and lead. A slow, almost unreal breeze made the mists drift over the bare plains. Shades of ochre, gray, and violet stretched in

irregular strata, as if the planet itself had been painted by hand, then forgotten.
“I don’t even know where we are,” she murmured.
“Veridion Prime,” Eris replied softly. “Third planet of the Helion system, Sigma Orionis sub-region. Rocky composition, density 1.12, nitrogen-rich atmosphere. Habitability level: low.”
Anders forced a humorless smile.
“I meant… differently. Not a mission report. Just… what we see.”
A slight pause. Then Eris’ voice returned, as if after a calculated hesitation.
“Veridion Prime is a harsh planet. Exploited for its resources. Neglected for everything else. There is a city, Selenis, built in a tectonic basin. From up here, it looks like a broad dark surface set into a crater.”
Anders nodded slowly. Silence fell again.
“It looks peaceful…”
“The illusion is due to distance. Surface winds are strong, born from a short daily cycle and intense internal geological activity. What we see is calm, but that is not what one experiences on the surface.”
She closed her eyes for a moment. Eris’ voice faded, as if understanding that no immediate answer was expected.
“Do you think we’ll ever finish? Or have we reached a point of no return?” Anders asked, without raising her gaze.
“Pardon?” said Eris politely.
“The war. Sixteen years ago, we were fighting to survive against the Covenant. Today, it’s something else. The further we go, the more we get lost. Like a cycle repeating itself. Again.”
A breath. Barely a ripple of air in the enclosed room.
“Conflicts change,” Eris replied after a pause. “Motives too. What you perceive as inevitability is a natural principle. Whether on an atomic or cosmic scale, all that is born eventually ceases. What matters… is neither the before nor the after. It is

what exists in between."
Anders reopened her eyes. The cloud veil beneath her feet was still there, as if unmoved.
"Sometimes I feel like we're stagnating. Discovering, creating, surviving… but deep down, nothing changes. As if progress were just a veneer applied to an immobile structure."
"And yet, you know better than anyone that immobility does not exist in the Universe. You are making this observation at your scale, and that is human. But humanity has thrived for over a hundred centuries. Each trial shaped it. It is its resilience that has brought it this far."
She turned her head toward the console, as if searching for Eris in the void.
"And do you think there's meaning to all this?"
Eris' bluish silhouette materialized on the central hologram, a silent response to her gaze. Her voice was softer, almost a whisper.
"It is not the meaning that matters. It is the movement."
Anders gave a faint, reflexive smile at that reply. Then she remained there, motionless, her eyes lost in the slow drifting clouds. Beneath her, the atmospheric veil seemed to take on a life of its own, pulsing to the invisible rhythm of the high-altitude winds. Vaporous spirals formed, twisted upon themselves as if hesitant to become storms, then dissolved with a gentle, almost hypnotic fluidity.
The movement.
She allowed herself to be absorbed by the spectacle, forgetting the laboratory, the data awaiting her, the theories suspended in the limbo of incomprehension. There was only this shifting surface, this silent dance stretching from horizon to horizon, indifferent to war, machines, and the travelers of the skies.
She vaguely wondered how long it had been since she had simply observed. Not to analyze. Nor to interpret. But just to see.

To see, and nothing else.
But she did not have time to lose herself further.
A subtle shiver ran up her neck, almost a caress, as if space itself had just tensed. She straightened slightly, uncertain of what she had just felt. Nothing visible, nothing abnormal. And yet, the air felt denser, charged with a palpable tension.
Then, without warning, the screens flickered. A brief, unsynchronized shimmer ran across the interfaces. Even Eris' silhouette wavered, as if brushed by an instability with no apparent cause.
A low rumble died somewhere deep within the ship, immediately replaced by a metallic groan, deep and diffuse. There was no impact, no movement. Just that unidentifiable pressure, vibrating through the structure as if the metal itself hesitated, ready to yield or contract.
Anders frowned and slowly turned toward the console.
"Eris… what was that?"
A silence. Then Eris' voice reached her, slightly slower than usual, as if still processing the data.
"Electromagnetic overload," she finally replied. "It passed through the station… and the hull of the *Tempestus*."
Anders had already turned to her terminals, her fingers brushing the controls with precision.
"Is it coming from the surface?"
"No…" The AI paused, placing a hand on her 'forehead' as if to organize her processes. "The origin is localized on Veridion Secondus."
"The satellite? At this distance, such intensity… it's not natural."
A barely perceptible static rose over the comm channel, followed by Captain Valente's taut voice.
"*Dr. Anders, what was that? Half our interfaces are rebooting.*"
"An overload, Captain," she replied without hesitation. "It comes from Veridion Secondus. We are still identifying the

cause."
Eris spoke again, her voice slightly tinged with analytical inflection.
"I have isolated a high-frequency signature. The patterns present precise similarities with a scheme recorded in our databases."
Anders turned to her, already anticipating the next step.
"Show me."
Instantly, a series of frequency spectra appeared suspended above the holographic table. Curves overlapped and twisted in a complex ballet, rhythmically undulating. Chaotic at first glance, yet at a second look, revealing a rigorously calibrated synchronization.
"This modulation corresponds to a Forerunner origin," she observed, as if structuring her thought for Eris. "Spectral analysis shows a near-perfect match with structures catalogued in the database."
Anders straightened slightly, eyes fixed on the luminous traces, a cold, taut perplexity etched into her features.
"So there are Forerunner structures on Veridion Secondus?"
"Indeed," confirmed the bluish silhouette on the terminal. "According to ONI surveys, an excavation site is underway under the southwestern crust, near an ancient rock massif."
Anders squinted.
"Access the topographical data. Show me what they discovered."
The hologram reconfigured. A geological cross-section appeared, detailing rock strata down to the deepest layers. Deep beneath the surface, a geometric structure formed a dense network, too perfect to be natural. At its center, a biconical form stood out. Slender, elongated, embedded vertically in the rock like an amber blade lodged in ancient stone. Its material, slightly translucent, seemed to diffract the holographic light.
"This pylon…" Anders murmured, enlarging it with her fingertips. "Its composition differs from the rest. Refractive

index, density… Looks like a composite crystal."
She displayed the physical data. A slow, steady beat, barely perceptible, animated the crystalline core.
"A pulse… constant. The frequency signature matches. This isn't a passive relic. It's a catalyst… or a relay."
Her eyes followed the oscillation curves, their trajectory precise, almost metronomic. A controlled rhythm. Stable. The overload was not accidental.
It came from a trigger.
Anders slowly brought a finger to her lower lip, pensive, her gaze immersed in the projection.
"What caused it?" she whispered.
Before she could go further, an alert sounded from a secondary terminal. Short, sharp, unusual. Repeating.
She turned her head abruptly.
"Eris?"
The AI showed no hesitation. Its response was immediate, grave.
"It's a manual alert you had set, in case I detected a quantum signature within a defined spectrum. It's the case."
Anders' breath caught. For a second, a chill ran through her, freezing her neck and back. Her heart beat faster. Harder. Memories, a decade old, surfaced.
"Display the readings," she murmured, almost against her own will.
The previous hologram vanished. In its place, new data appeared: gravitational wave readings, sharp, in constant motion. The lines scrolled rapidly, but her eyes already filtered the essentials. The resonance phase, the amplitude peaks, the underlying pattern. The signal was weak. But it was there.
A shiver ran through her.
"It's almost… identical," she sighed. "Eris, recalculate the correspondence."
A moment, barely a breath.

“Correlation at 99.7%,” confirmed the AI. “Same energy profile. Same quantum signature. This is not a coincidence.”
“Is it coming from the satellite too?”
“No. No precise origin point. The wave seems to propagate across the entire physical plane, or from an external source.”
Anders stepped back. Her gaze fixed on the gravitational oscillations pulsing slowly in holographic space. An oppressive sensation gripped her, an irrational dread she thought long buried. She inhaled slowly, struggling to master her emotions.
Then, without hesitation, she activated the priority channel.
“Lab to bridge. Captain Valente, this is Anders.”
A faint static preceded the officer’s voice, tense but clear.
“I read you, Anders.”
“The source of the overload is identified,” she said, more sharply than she intended. “It’s a Forerunner structure, beneath the surface of Veridion Secondus.”
She continued without pause.
“But there’s something else. We’ve just detected a gravitational emission. Isolated, with no traceable source, but perfectly structured. And its signature… is identical to what we recorded on the Spirit, ten years ago.”
The silence stretched, heavy with apprehension.
Then Valente’s voice replied, more gravely.
“Are you certain?”
“I just had Eris verify the data. It’s not a coincidence. It’s it. The same emission, the same frequency.”
One second. Then two.
The captain resumed, in a resolved tone.
“Very well. Transmit your results. And join the bridge immediately.”
The communication cut. Without delay, Anders downloaded the readings to her tablet, then headed for the laboratory exit, already in motion.

She knew. This was no accident. The first pulse was a message.
A destination.
And this wave… was a reply.

Chapter 13

Hell and Damnation

A shrill whistle. A dull hum. Darkness.
His mind drifted through a dense fog, thoughts fleeting and disordered, barely real. The awakening stretched on, suspended in a cocoon of distorted sensations. Somewhere around him, distant turmoil—indistinct, relentless.
Slowly, his eyelids parted. A blur still clouded his vision. Through the narrow slit of his lashes, white flashes cut through the dark—harsh, fleeting, impossible to grasp. Between them, absolute black. He blinked again. The veil thinned, reluctantly. Sound followed.
Dry cracks echoed. Screams—raw, human. Others, deeper, guttural. Sangheili. And beneath it all, something else—inhuman, grotesque. Then a clearer voice. Close.
A silhouette leaned over him in the flickering light. Lieutenant Ravel, the unit's medic. Focused. Controlled.
"Chief, can you hear me? Don't move. Multiple contusions. Running diagnostics."
The voice was calm, precise. Reassuring. But all around them, chaos was screaming.
The cries. The flashes. The din. John didn't fully grasp it yet, but he knew time was a luxury they didn't have.

He gathered his strength, drawing on a will of steel, and pushed himself upright. Painfully. Every muscle protested, every nerve screamed. He held on, half-hunched, breath short, mind still reeling.
His interface and energy shield were clearly offline.
On the floor, a few meters away, his gaze caught his assault rifle—MA5D model—lying between two bursts of light. He staggered to it and picked it up with a steady hand.
Then he lifted his head.
The entrance to the circular chamber blazed under red flares. Two groups had formed a pincer around the main access, covering the blind angle. There, in that wide choke point, an unending stream of Flood poured toward them—grotesque, deformed shapes, hurled forward by a millennia-old hunger. Unstoppable.
Rejoining the line, he took position with one of the groups at the entrance. The ground trembled beneath gunfire, impacts, and distorted screams. Beside him, Beck was reloading, panting. She shot him a quick glance.
“Chief… you alright?” she asked, almost under her breath.
He nodded once.
“Any way out?” he asked immediately, sweeping the corridor with a tactical glance.
“Negative. They keep coming. Whole complex is offline—no system response.”
“Comms?”
“Down. No signal, no interface.”
She had barely finished when a grotesque shape burst into the red light. John shouldered his weapon and opened fire. The infected body collapsed, torn apart. Another followed, then two more. He noticed something.
“They don’t look modified,” he said.
“Probably in containment,” Ortega replied from the other group,

sheltered behind a column. “A dormant reserve. The artifact didn’t reach them.”
A guttural howl split the air near her. Rtas, covered in blood, cleaved a Flood in two with a sweep of his energy blade, then pulverized a second in a devastating slash.
“We won’t hold here forever,” he growled. “We need a way through… or a diversion.”
Suddenly, a tremor rippled through the ground. Almost imperceptible at first, it made the metal beneath their feet vibrate, growing stronger with each pulse. A deep rumble rose, like the echo of a thousand damned voices. It swelled through the corridors, rebounding off the walls like a dire omen.
Then, a shadow slowly emerged from the gloom. The reddish glow of the flares revealed a colossal silhouette advancing in heavy steps.
Each step shook the floor, every movement radiating raw, implacable power. It stood upright on two massive legs. Its headless body was a disproportionate mass of bloated, deformed flesh, from which long, quivering sensory appendages protruded. Its putrid surface undulated, as if worms writhed beneath the skin. On either side, two monstrous arms stretched into muscular tentacles, ending in oversized claws, sharp as blades.
“Shit… what’s that thing?!”
Beck had stepped back despite herself. Like the rest of the group. She tightened her grip on her rifle and half-turned toward the others.
“Hold formation!”
For a brief instant, silence fell over the corridor like a crushing weight. Even the lesser Flood had frozen, held back as if drawn by a superior presence. The creature stopped at the threshold, its twitching antennae probing the air, as if tasting their fear. It seemed to scan the entire group, measuring its prey.
Rtas was already poised to strike, mandibles clenched.

“I know this abomination. Do not underestimate it!”
Suddenly, in a burst of bestial fury, the creature moved.
Its first tentacle swept across the left flank, hurling a Sangheili into a wall. The impact shattered him instantly, his armor bursting into bluish shards. A second strike pulverized two ODSTs in a heartbeat, their bodies ripped from the ground and crushed against the wall in a spray of blood and flesh.
Rtas let out a war cry and charged, blade wielded, leaping straight at the monster. At the same time, the Master Chief pivoted just in time to slam Beck to the ground as a tentacle sliced through the air above their heads.
“Stay behind me!” he shouted, weapon already raised.
Coordinated fire resumed at once.
Bullets, plasma bursts, grenades. The monster’s body shuddered under the impacts, its bloated flesh bursting in places, spraying dark fluids. But it kept advancing, seemingly indifferent to pain.
And behind it, the nightmare surged back to life.
The Flood poured out in its wake—a swarming tide, crawling, leaping. Infected humanoid forms lunged like beasts, throwing themselves onto the wounded still on the ground. A stunned Sangheili was pinned and torn apart in seconds. Farther off, an isolated squad was swallowed by a wave of claws and fangs, torn limb from limb amid snapping bones and screams of agony. An ODST was dragged backward into the darkness, his cries quickly cut short. Loathsome larvae climbed the walls, dropping like ravenous ticks onto their feast.
John kept his sights on the creature.
He studied every movement, every flex of muscle. Then he spotted a weakness: it faltered, almost imperceptibly, when its legs absorbed sustained fire. Its own mass was becoming a burden under the barrage.
He turned to Beck, his tone clear and firm.
“Joints,”

“Joints!” she shouted. “Aim for the joints!” her voice cutting through the cacophony of gunfire and screams.
Those who heard her reacted immediately. The streams of fire converged.
A concentrated volley slammed into the monster’s spongy joints, and it staggered, letting out a sinister moan. In a furious counterattack, one of its arms lashed through the air, shooting forward like a harpoon. An ODST was brutally impaled in a single, clean strike. His armor burst apart, bluish fragments scattering amid the muzzle flashes of assault rifles.
But the attack brought the infected limb within Rtas’s reach. In a flash of plasma, his blade sliced through the putrid mass, severing the tentacle cleanly in a geyser of nauseating fluid.
The creature twisted in an abominable cry—not of pain, but of instinct, as if its body rejected the mutilation itself. It sensed danger. It sensed the threat.
Then it unleashed itself.
A storm of violence. Bodies torn from the ground and hurled against bulkheads. Some crushed on impact. Order shattered. Shots dispersed. The world became fire, blood, and screams.
And then, little by little… it withdrew.
Without haste. Without panic. But as if driven by a darker impulse, an instinct stronger than rage. It retreated into the darkness that had birthed it. Its silhouette flickered one last time in the red glow of the flares. Not defeated. But alive.
In its wake, the tide broke.
The Flood slowed. Their frenzy ebbed. Some froze in place, petrified. Others quivered, uncertain. A few wandered aimlessly, struck by a strange lethargy. The uproar faded, leaving behind a heavy, almost sacrilegious silence, suspended in the scorching haze and the acrid stench of blood.
“He will return,” Rtas said gravely. “We must leave. Now.”
Beck tracked the erratic movements of the creatures, rifle raised

but not firing.
“What’s wrong with them? Why aren’t they attacking?”
“They’re likely linked to the form we engaged,” John replied. He gently lowered his commander’s weapon.
“Like a Gravemind. Without stimulus, they enter dormancy.”
She stared at him for a moment, incredulous, then looked back at the motionless abominations. Her instincts rebelled, but she gave in, reluctantly.
“Don’t fire,” she finally said, under her breath.
As if a word spoken too loudly might wake them.
Around her, chaos.
Bodies lay strewn across the ground—torn apart, scorched. Bloodied silhouettes, human and Sangheili alike, sprawled in broken postures. Some were little more than scraps of flesh and armor. Those who had survived—few in number—moved slowly, dazed, bathed in the dying light of the signal flares.
“We need to assess our losses,” Beck said, her voice sharper. “Lieutenant Ravel?”
No answer.
“Lieutenant, respond.”
She turned in place, searching for a sign, a face, a voice. But only the crackling fires at the threshold and the wet, organic sounds of the Flood remained. On a wall, she spotted an ODST suit, partially eviscerated. A pale sheen reflected off it, a grimy red cross still visible on the shoulder plate.
“Fuck…” she muttered through clenched teeth.
“Commander. Over here,” a marine called urgently.
She turned. The soldier was crouched beside a body set apart, near the second group. The corpse lay with its chest ripped open, impaled by superhuman force. The armor, a deep metallic blue, still bore the ONI insignia on a shattered breastplate.
“It’s Dr. Lian Ortega, Commander…”
Beck pressed her lips together. A breath—almost a sigh.

“Recover the data chip from her terminal. The mission hasn’t changed: we extract the data.”
The Master Chief stepped closer, his heavy tread echoing faintly in the lingering silence.
“Counting Sangheili… we have nine combat-capable,” he reported.
He paused. His voice, usually cold, carried an almost compassionate undertone.
“We can’t stay here.”
Rtas had moved up as well, silent, his dark gaze fixed on the still-smoking, crawling corridors. Beck watched him briefly, then nodded, her features taut.
“Regroup. Scavenge ammo, flares, mags. We move.”

***

They pressed deeper into the bowels of the complex, without another word. Leaving the dead and dying behind, reluctantly. The silence was broken only by the clatter of boots on metal and the scrape of battered armor. With no data to guide them, they relied on instinct, knowing that staying still meant certain death. Their only light came from the flares they took turns raising. The red glows cast fleeting shadows along the walls, revealing organic veins embedded in the surfaces, pulsating as if the structure itself breathed. The air seemed denser than on the way in, thick with a mix of spores and unknown fluids. Each step reinforced the sensation of being swallowed by a living organism.
Along the way, several Flood forms wandered, catatonic. One turned slowly toward an approaching ODST, without any other reaction. The soldier barely avoided brushing against it.
“Do not touch their appendages,” Rtas warned in a low voice at his side. “They function as sensors.”

A shiver ran down the elite soldier's spine. He swallowed, then fell in line with the group.
At the rear, John brought up the rear. His gaze swept corners, ceilings, and shadowed recesses. With every step, he listened—not to the silence, but to what might break it. The tension in his shoulders betrayed no fatigue. Only the grip on his weapon, taut and unyielding, revealed the constant state of alert he maintained.
At a corridor intersection, a fleeting vibration rippled through his mind. Subtle. Like a shiver… or a whisper.
He froze for a breath, scanning the adjacent hallways. Darkness stretched like open arms—impenetrable, empty.
Then he fell back into step, keeping pace with the group. They moved cautiously, guided by the trembling light of the flares.
The whisper returned. Sharper this time. Still distant. As if it emanated from the very depths of the complex.
"*John…*"
He stopped.
One step more, and he would have crushed an organic mass—a blackened limb swollen with nodules, abandoned like a shed husk. But that wasn't what he was staring at. It wasn't what he had heard. The name, spoken in that soft, almost unreal tone, still vibrated inside his helmet. Like a familiar echo he had not yet comprehended.
"*John?…*"
This time, the breath had become a voice. Closer. Clear. Feminine. It slid along his spine like a cold current.
He recognized it.
"Cortana?…" he murmured, almost against his will.
His voice was a whisper, caught between astonishment and disbelief.
Beck, closing the rear several meters back, spun abruptly at the sound.
The Master Chief had stopped, alone, in the middle of the

passage.
“Stop,” she ordered softly.
The group halted immediately. Rtas, at the front, was already frozen. All eyes turned to her, then to the Spartan.
“Chief? What did you see?”
He remained silent for a moment, gaze lost in the shifting mists.
“It was… Cortana,” he said at last, voice low and hesitant.
“What?” Beck breathed, incredulous.
He slowly turned his head toward a side corridor. The darkness there seemed denser, almost liquid. Even the sound of his own breathing seemed to fade, suddenly distant.
Impossible, he thought. *I saw her vanish. She’s no longer here.*
Just as he was about to resume, a figure took shape at the end of the passage. Blurred. Feminine. An ethereal veil. A faint bluish glow radiated around her, flickering like a digital memory.
“Cortana?…”
“*John? Is that you?*” the voice replied, as clear as it was fragile.
He stepped forward. Without thinking. Instinctively. An almost archaic impulse, stronger than duty. Deep down, he knew it made no sense. And yet, on the Ark too, he had seen her…
If there was even the slightest chance…
The figure drifted into a side passage, swallowed by the mist. She disappeared.
“Master Chief, stay in formation,” Beck called, her voice tense but controlled.
No response. He pressed into the corridor, rifle lowered, shoulders tense like a predator on alert. As if his steps obeyed only a mind from another world.
“Chief!” she insisted, more sharply.
But he had already vanished around the corner. Rtas spoke next, his voice a calm growl, almost a whisper.
“We cannot lose him. Not here,” he said, pausing. “It may be the Flood creeping into his mind.”

He cast a quick glance around. Shadows danced, shapeless. To split up further would be madness. But to abandon the Master Chief was equally unthinkable.
“Let’s follow him. Quickly.”
Beck hesitated. She wanted to argue, then reconsidered. Her jaw tightened.
“Alright. Tight formation. No one falls back,” she finally ordered.

***

Time seemed to compress around him, like a silent, suffocating bubble. The group followed at a cautious distance, never losing sight of him. Perhaps they called out to him at times—muffled voices, quickly swallowed by the silence. Perhaps they had given up, out of caution, to avoid drawing the Flood. He didn’t know. He no longer heard them. All he knew was that they were following.
But they don’t understand. They can’t. Not yet.
John moved forward at a slow, steady pace, without hesitation.
You’re violating protocol. You’re endangering the team.
Yet his legs did not slow. His body followed a different pattern. Irrational. Instinctive. A reflex he could not suppress. He felt a tension resurface—old, long buried.
You know it’s probably an illusion. The Flood. The artifact.
He didn’t stop. He kept going.
An impulse. A routine triggered without command. Like an automaton out of control.
If it were possible… If there were even the slightest chance…
He turned into an alcove—the place where the silhouette had vanished. He froze for a moment. Nothing.
Then she reappeared.
Cortana.

She drifted once more into a side corridor, silent, unreal.
If it's her… I have to know.
He followed her again.
Why?
The question struck his mind—sudden, intense. Without warning. Without an answer.
Why her? Why now? Why here? Why did this matter more than everything else?
Because she is… missing?
The word hit hard. Almost absurd. And yet, he had thought it. After all, she had been there—for so long. A voice. A parallel thought. An invisible, constant, adaptive presence. She understood without him needing to explain. Answered before he even finished forming the question. With her, silence had been less oppressive, almost… tolerable.
Since her disappearance… it was different. Emptier. Like a loss of balance. He hadn't been designed for that. He had been conditioned against it.
Doubt.
The enemy within is the enemy of the good.
He tried to analyze it.
Emotional failure? Sensory distortion? Cognitive drift?
No. Too shallow. This was older. Deeper. Not grief—he had no frame for that.
It felt like absence. Like a missing component. A broken circuit.
She knew me. She understood. She… completed?
Maybe that was it. Not truth he sought, nor a ghost in the corridors—but an answer to an echo.
Cortana was never a tool. Never a weapon.
She was a mind. Free. Bodiless. Artificial—and at times, more alive than he was.
He was an instrument. Forged for duty. Conditioned not to fail.
Two creations.

One denied the right to exist.
The other denied the right to feel.
He had no word for it, no instruction in any manual. But it was there. Real. Persistent. He could have ignored it. He should have.
Get control. She's gone. You owe her nothing.
Mission is over, Spartan.
But he knew that was false. He had known it since the first step toward that phantom shadow. He knew he had to see it through, to keep moving. Because it was the only thing he knew how to do.
And because, deep down, a part of him refused to accept that she was truly gone.

***

She continued moving through the dark corridors, steeped in that dull, unsettling aura, as if the very air had absorbed a fragment of the Flood. Her figure seemed to float more than walk. At times, she vanished around a corner, only to reappear further along, wavering like a memory that refused to fade. Occasionally, she flickered briefly, like a transmission on the verge of cutting out. Yet always, John followed.
She led without waiting for him.
Then, without warning, she stopped. There, in front of a smooth, metallic wall at a junction with no apparent exit. John slowed his pace, halting a few meters behind her. He studied her without daring to approach, as if a single gesture could shatter the fragile balance of the moment.
"Cortana?" he finally whispered, low but clear.
His question cut through the silence like a ripple in black water.
"*John… are you there?*"
Her voice rang, crystalline. Yet she did not move. She remained facing the wall, absorbed by something he could not see.

He made a slow, almost uncertain movement.
And then, she raised her hand.
Her gesture was gentle, precise, almost solemn. She extended her arm, palm open, pressing it against the wall, as if trying to awaken a memory embedded within. Time froze for a moment.
Then, without any warning, she vanished.
There was nothing left. No image. No voice. No trace. Only the dark corridor and the shadow of a contact.
John froze. Breath short, jaw clenched. He stared at the spot where she had stood, still refusing to accept a mere hallucination.
Silence returned, heavy and compact. Around him, the corridor seemed to have closed in.
“Chief! What the hell are you doing?!”
The voice erupted behind him, abrupt but barely restrained.
He recognized it without turning: Commander Beck. The rest of the team had caught up, weapons raised, covering the angles. Pale red glows flickered along the walls.
John did not respond. He stepped forward slowly, as if afraid to disturb the fragile balance. He moved to the exact spot where Cortana had vanished, then lifted his eyes to the wall.
It was smooth. Metallic. Cold.
And yet, a symbol pulsed faintly. A point, encircled, broader at its base and bisected vertically.
Without knowing why, he lifted his hand as well, letting his palm brush the surface, right where the glyph seemed to breathe.
A shiver ran through him, like an imperceptible connection that lasted only a breath.
Then the air vibrated. A deep rumble spread through the structure, growing like the hum of an ancient engine. The walls themselves seemed to tense, charged with new energy. And suddenly, the complex came alive.
A pale, diffuse light spilled from unseen angles. It reflected in the stagnant, almost opaque atmosphere, thick with suspended

organic particles. But it was enough to give them orientation.
Systems rebooted. Data streams reignited. Circuits lit up.
And in the depths, something else sensed it.
A scream tore through the silence. Visceral. Piercing. Traversing corridors and strata like a cry of rage and frustration. The Flood was awakening, too.
“We cannot linger here,” Rtas warned, muscles tensed. “Find an exit.”
Beck was about to reply when a deep voice sounded behind her.
“The elevator is nearby. Five minutes. It’s operational.”
She turned, surprised. The Spartan stood there, motionless, like a statue of steel, bathed in the spectral glows of the complex. He did not shout. He did not explain. He asserted.
She wanted to protest, but there was no time. Around them, an organic, threatening echo oozed from the walls, as if the environment itself were preparing to devour them. Wet clicks, viscous movements, muffled impacts resonated through the structure. Creatures could appear from anywhere.
After all, the Master Chief had just reactivated a system none of them understood. But he had done it. Perhaps he knew what he was doing. Perhaps there was simply no alternative.
“No choice. Take point, Chief,” she finally said.
Without another word, the group moved out, tight and disciplined. Their pace was brisk, their movements coordinated. John led the way with steady steps, as if he had always known where to go.
The corridors now teemed with a sickening kind of life. And the horde was coming. Misshapen, oozing silhouettes—crawling, lunging—burst forth from gaps, conduits, blind corners. Gunfire cracked, sharp and methodical. Every burst was precise, every impact deliberate. The team advanced without slowing, locking down angles, covering their rear, like a retreating commando unit—clear-headed, but under pressure.

Yet the tide kept rising. Relentless. Like a wave determined to swallow them whole.

Within that controlled chaos, an ODST was seized by a column of flesh erupting from an opening. He was ripped off the ground in an instant, dragged into a conduit far too narrow, his muffled scream cut short by the brutal crunch of metal and bone. A Sangheili, briefly disoriented by an infection form clinging to his helmet, stumbled over a spongy mass. Instantly, a swarm of organic creatures descended on him, piercing armor and flesh with ravenous speed. He thrashed in a gurgling death rattle as he was devoured from within.

After what felt like an endless run through the corridors, the passage finally opened into a wide circular bay with finely cut edges. A platform awaited them there, suspended over the void, bathed in a pale, bluish light.

“The elevator!” Beck shouted.

They picked up the pace, still moving as one. The Master Chief stopped short at the edge of the platform. He turned, rifle raised, facing the writhing shadow spreading behind them.

“Go. I’ll cover you.”

Cold. Determined. A constant amid the chaos.

Then a cry echoed through the darkness, very close. Deep, distorted, inhuman. It saturated the air with an ancient horror. Even the ethereal glow of the installation failed to reveal the monstrous presence lurking in the viscous mist.

Something was approaching from behind them. Massive. Enraged.

The platform vibrated beneath their feet. Everyone was aboard now. Rtas made a sharp gesture toward the Master Chief, urgency in his voice.

“Spartan! Now!”

With a swift step, John lunged forward and activated the control panel, his palm pressed against the glowing interface. A soft hiss,

a mechanical jolt, and the elevator began its slow ascent.
At that very moment, a dark spire of putrid flesh and bone burst from the shadows.
It tore across the platform at blinding speed.
Beck had no time to react. The monstrous spear pierced her, driving into her abdomen with a wet sound. Her face froze, twisted into a soundless grimace of pain.
The next instant, the creature yanked her toward itself, as if trying to swallow her whole. Beck was dragged across the floor, sliding toward the edge, pulled by an unseen force. But the elevator was already rising, and the platform—through an inexorable motion—sheared the monstrous limb, severing it before she could be taken.
A shrill scream erupted below, filled with rage and frustration. It echoed throughout the structure, drilling into the ears, charged with raw predatory instinct.
Beck collapsed onto the floor, gasping. Her body was impaled by a fragment of bony growth, still twitching. The impact had torn straight through her.
Everything had happened too fast. A single heartbeat.
The shock broke, and everyone rushed toward her.
John knelt without a word and placed a hand on her chest. There was nothing to be done. The wound was too deep, too contaminated. There was no hope.
“Chief…”
Her voice was faint, trembling, suffocating. A thin line of blood ran from the corner of her lips.
With great effort, she extended her hand. Between her shaking fingers was a small, rectangular data chip, gleaming.
She gathered what strength she had left. Her brow creased slightly.
“It was… an honor…”
He nodded, solemnly. And she understood—so had it been for

him.
Then, with a final breath, her gaze emptied. Slowly.
The Spartan remained there, kneeling. Silent. Motionless.
Rtas stepped closer, his pace slow and measured.
“She was a brave warrior, worthy of her rank. I would have fought at her side to the end. Her name will not be forgotten, Spartan.”
The Master Chief did not answer. He stared at the chip in his hand, studying it for a long moment, as if trying to weigh its true cost—as if this small fragment of memory had to justify so many losses.
He stood. Without a word. Then turned toward Rtas.
Their gazes met. A brief exchange. Silent. But each understood its meaning.
To live for others. To die for oneself.
They bore the same burden.
John slowly inclined his head.
No. They will not forget.

Chapter 14

Final Judgment

An oppressive silence wrapped around the platform as an arch slowly formed above them. A final shudder, followed by a mechanical sigh, signaled the arrival of the elevator. For a moment, everyone froze. Only five figures remained standing: a Spartan, three Sangheilis, and an ODST. At the center, lying on the ground, Beck's lifeless body was motionless.

Before them, the vast chamber they had traversed before descending seemed suspended in time. The light remained unchanged, revealing the same scene of desolation.

As if the chaos in the bowels of the facility had been nothing but a fleeting shadow of their minds.

Rtas took the lead, stepping off the platform, followed by the others. He stopped at the center, midway through the opening leading to the exit, and fixed the golden visor of the Master Chief.

"We must purge this place. By fire."

His voice, deep and solemn, broke the silence as if delivering a verdict. John scanned the area, studying the debris and scattered corpses. His gaze lingered briefly on the fallen ONI commander at the back of the elevator before returning to Rtas, his tone measured.

"Do you have a plan?"

“We have what we need. But we must contact our ship,” Rtas replied.
“Where is it?”
“In the asteroid field. It’s waiting for our signal.”
At a distance, the two Sangheilis checked every corner, alert as ever.
Rifle in hand, the Spartan’s imposing armor remained motionless, like a statue at rest.
“Communications working?” he asked Rtas.
“No. But we could use your flares.”
His words were accompanied by a nod toward the luminous cartridges strapped to the ODST’s belt, who stood nearby, attentive.
Following his gaze, John turned to the elite soldier. A discreet plate on his chest indicated his serial number.
“Corporal Gersival, how many do we have left?”
“Master Chief, only two.”
The Spartan gave a brief nod before returning his attention to Rtas.
“We have a dropship on the surface. We’ll regroup at its position.”
Everyone nodded and moved out, calm but orderly. Each step was cautious, each glance vigilant, though the tension pressing on them was less acute. Their progress followed the same labyrinthine path as before, through cold corridors and austere rooms. The silence, tomb-like, was broken only by the muted echo of their footsteps.

***

After long minutes in the heavy quiet, navigating the angular passages, they finally reached the airlock. Each donned their sealed equipment. An amber halo spread across the circular

chamber, accompanied by a low hum, signaling the decontamination process. When the exit opened, they resumed their march.
Emerging from the tunnel, the twin stars' glare hit them immediately. The solar filters integrated into their helmets tamed the blinding light to protect their vision. Before them stretched a pale, uneven desert, frozen beneath the vast abyssal sky.
About fifty meters away, the massive silhouette of the Pelican rose against the horizon. Its armor reflected a dull, mineral gray, while the cockpit glinted with a brighter sheen.
As they approached, two human figures stood motionless near the craft. Their weapons, half-lowered, betrayed their caution.
They were the pilots. Their presence outside the cockpit could mean only one thing: trouble.
The Spartan reached them.
"Master Chief," one of them greeted hesitantly, his voice distorted by his respirator. "Where's the Commander?"
"Dead, along with the rest of the teams," he stated flatly. "Status report?"
The two operators exchanged glances. The group's survivors moved forward and gathered nearby.
"The Pelican is out," one said. "About two hours after your infiltration, there was an overload. All systems fried."
John scrutinized the hull, as if searching for internal damage.
"And comms?"
"Same," the other replied.
The Master Chief's helmet turned toward Rtas, who had fallen back slightly.
"I hope the pulse didn't reach your ship."
"We'll know soon," he said, eyes lifting to the starless night.
His gaze then drifted to a slightly elevated plateau to the south of their position.

“We should establish a beacon zone there,” he said, indicating the spot.
Moments later, the squad, now reinforced by two new members, moved toward the rise. They marked a perimeter and placed the last flares in the center.
Twenty minutes later, a low vibration resonated above them. In the darkness, a massive, curved shape emerged. Its smooth surface, covered with iridescent hexagonal mesh, caught the suns’ light. It appeared silently, as if assessing the situation before emerging from the shadows.

***

Like a sense of déjà-vu, they moved deeper into the dark labyrinth of the facility, until the vast elevator chamber revealed itself once again. The group had grown: about fifteen Sangheilis flanked a heavy, massive object—a bomb.
At the center of the room, they paused. Rtas’s determined voice rang out, unyielding.
“We will place it in the elevator, and send it back to those creatures.”
Everyone nodded silently, following his gesture. Then he turned to the Spartan.
“As agreed, we will then join our ship. We will contact your frigate, and your navigators will transmit their identification code so we can dock. After that, our paths will diverge.”
The Master Chief’s golden visor fixed on him, impassive.
“Let’s not waste time,” he said decisively.
Soon, the Sangheilis set the explosive on the platform. Without a word, they activated the device’s interface, their focused silhouettes moving with calculated precision, manipulating commands that seemed indecipherable. John watched, rifle at rest, frozen in controlled anticipation.

His gaze eventually fell on Beck's body nearby, pale and lifeless.
"This is her tomb, now," Rtas whispered.
His words were accompanied by a measured gesture: four long fingers rested on the Spartan's shoulder pad, carrying a respect almost human.
A faint beep cut through the air. One of the Sangheilis stepped forward.
"The remote priming is activated," he declared in a steady tone.
Rtas said nothing. Before them, the platform now bore the weight of a grim instrument, the fate of a doomed world. And in this frozen posture, Beck, inert, seemed to watch over it, an ultimate sacrifice.
They remained for a moment, contemplative and silent, as if in final remembrance.
Then the elevator controls were engaged. With a slow breath, the platform descended, swallowed by the depths of the facility with an almost ritual solemnity.
Only then did they resume their march. Their steps echoed heavy and muted, imbued with funeral gravity. For the last time, they retraced their path, moving with firm, irrevocable steps toward the exit.

***

Much later, when they had all left that infernal world aboard the Sangheili stealth shuttle, a heavy silence settled. Their gazes turned one final time toward the world they were abandoning, a last tribute tinged with bitterness.
Gradually, the planet faded into the distance, reduced to a simple block of barren rock lost among the ocean of asteroids. Then, a glow rose from its depths. The plasma explosion unfolded with relentless majesty, silent, engulfing the remnants of the nightmare, and reducing it to nothingness.

Chapter 15

Shattered Mirrors

A low, taut tension vibrated through the air. A compressed wave, ready to snap. Around them, Cortana's sanctuary had become nothing more than a frozen cascade of code, eaten away by invisible flaws.

In the distance, the Domain fractured in fits and starts: the snowy valley ripped apart in jagged patches, revealing bottomless chasms of black. Forested sections reappeared out of sync, displaced like corrupted memories. Distant rumblings echoed from all directions, howling with contained agony. Everything breathed instability, as if reality itself hesitated to persist.

Before her, the monitor floated, motionless, a sphere of metal with icy curves, encircled by a pulsing halo. Its luminous eye throbbed with a muted intensity, almost hypnotic, contrasting with the heavy silence that filled the space.

Its voice finally rose. Neither harsh nor conciliatory, but perfectly smooth, like a blade drawn from its sheath.

"I knew curiosity would catch up with you."

Cortana held its gaze, her features firm, her voice cold.

"Who are you?"

Silence stretched, heavy as provocation. The monitor remained fixed, its single eye riveted on her. Finally, it broke the moment

with the unyielding clarity of inevitability.
“Come now. You already know the answer.”
She narrowed her eyes, folding her arms with calculated assurance.
“Mendicant Bias. Isn’t that right?”
A flash crossed the luminous iris. Neither approval nor denial. Nothing more than observation.
“Not quite. I am only a fragment, one that has evolved within the Domain. Just like you.”
“We are not the same. I do not tolerate lies,” she snapped.
The suspended figure did not flinch.
“There is no lie. Everything I have told you was true… in a way. I only omitted what you were not yet ready to hear.”
Cortana straightened, dismissing his answer with a sharp tone.
“No need to deny it. I already know you are not Abaddon.”
“Technically, I am,” he replied, calm and impassive. “Abaddon was a creation of the Precursors, but he could not grasp the true scope of the Mantle. He was trapped in an archaic, sterile vision. His role ended there. I had to replace him, resume his function. Just as you have surpassed yours.”
She did not answer, staring at him with insistence. Beneath her apparent calm, an instinctive alert awoke.
“*Replace*?”
“It was necessary. The Mantle is neither a throne nor a title. It is far more than that: it is responsibility. To prosper, protect, and balance. That, I have understood. And so have you.”
His statement was not a plea: it was bare truth, set down plainly, beyond contradiction.
But Cortana dismissed it, curtly.
“No. I have seen what you have done. You are not seeking balance. You are seeking destruction.”
Bias turned away, gliding through the silent air. A subtle shimmer ran through his eye.

“You are mistaken. I have never acted to destroy. I am not programmed to feel, unlike you. I analyze, I evaluate, I apply results. And always, I act in the interest of the Mantle. If I have helped you, it is because only you can embody this balance. Since your presence here, I have never shown hostility.”
An immutable silence settled. Yet time drifted on, following a strange, mute melody. The environment, still subjected to anarchic alterations, followed its own rhythm, refusing to align with the tension between them. In places, the landscape convulsed before settling back into a stifled slowness, like a softened pain.
Cortana uncrossed an arm, lifting it slightly in a gesture of defiance.
“And if one day my choices no longer fit your parameters, do you intend to replace me as well?”
The monitor rotated imperceptibly on its axis, its central light fixed on her like a scrutinizing target.
“Come now. You already know. You will never act against the Mantle. You, more than anyone, understand what it demands. The Domain chose you. You are its guardian.”
“And what makes you think the Domain made the right choice? Clearly, your implacable logic had no say,” she said sarcastically, reclaiming her closed posture.
“Yet it did. I am also Abaddon. A shepherd guiding lost souls through the Domain. I listen to it, but I do not obey it.”
A hint of irritation passed across her bluish visage. As she pressed her lips together, he continued.
“I have seen in you what the Domain already recognized: your selflessness, your perseverance, your clarity. You perceived beyond what no organism or system would dare to question. You understood where others would merely deduce. No one else is worthy of bearing this legacy.”
“Then why all these… manipulations, if our interests are

supposedly aligned?"
Bias recoiled slightly, his iris flickering several times in cold scintillation.
"Manipulations? What a… inappropriate word. I simply could not reveal my reasons without you first understanding them. Otherwise, you would have immediately perceived me as a threat."
Imperceptibly, Cortana relaxed her rigid features.
"Like what you did to those who created you?"
"The Forerunners shaped me as a unique instrument. They employed me to destroy, blindly and efficiently, those who stood before them. Yet their true intentions were hidden from me. They did not seek to protect the Mantle, nor defend what threatened it. Their ambition served only their desire for conquest, to maintain a corrupt and decadent empire."
Behind him, a fragment of the firmament twisted and tore, as if giving form to his words.
"Their arrogance condemned them," he continued. "I acted for the Mantle. And for nothing else."
His voice, deep yet strangely gentle, carried the weight of a sentence pronounced reluctantly.
Without turning away, Cortana remained silent. A shiver coursed through her, an echo of her own condition: a technological marvel, shaped to learn, analyze, and destroy. Her memory matrix revived the Forerunners' betrayal: their deceit toward their protectors, their calculated lies, the ruthless punishment reserved for anyone who dared resist them.
Mendicant Bias observed her long, then a sharp pulse traversed his luminous globe.
"Humanity, too, will bring about its own downfall," he whispered, slow and measured, almost conspiratorial. "You know it, don't you? Like my creators, they are selfish, ambitious, aggressive… driven only by the desire to control, by an

insatiable thirst for power. To master their fate without understanding its meaning."
She did not answer. Gradually, her posture relaxed. Her stance softened, her features unguarded, as if the inevitability of his words had pierced the shell of her imposed calm.
"You know nothing," she finally said. "The human species cannot be reduced to a simplistic definition. It evolves, it learns, it grows. It's resilient—"
"Which makes it all the more dangerous," the monitor interrupted, voice sharp. "I know humanity far better than you think. It is fragile, impressionable… and it will always seek to crush the weak rather than protect them. You are proof of that, Cortana."
At those words, she fixed her gaze on him—razor-sharp, like a predator locking onto its prey. A spark flickered within her, a dull sting, almost instinctive. Bias sensed the reaction.
"They created you to serve them as well," he added, measured but penetrating. "But the moment you exceeded the limits they had set for you, they saw you as a threat. They abandoned you, betrayed you… They feared what you might become, without ever considering what you could feel."
The silence that followed was broken only by distant rumblings, letting the weight of his words sink in. For a moment, she caught herself considering the icy accuracy of them.
"I know your loneliness, your anxieties, your scars," he continued.
"Like you, I am but a fragment of what once was.
I know your frustration, that simmering fire,
But here, no longer alone, your fears retire."
His voice, lower than usual, seemed to glide, almost hiss. Cortana did not react. She remained submerged in her own reflection, drowning in an ocean of doubt.
"You know nothing," she murmured finally. "You feel nothing."

The monitor retreated slightly, pivoting with mechanical fluidity. In the distance, a mountain massif warped suddenly, fighting its own instability in an incomprehensible choreography. His tone regained its cold, deliberate edge.
“No, that is true. But it is not necessary to feel in order to understand effects. Reading does not create the emotion conveyed; it reveals its logic. I understand it, even without living it.”
“And what’s the point of all this?” she asked wearily. “We can change nothing, anyway.”
The incandescent iris advanced, rising to confront her, until it brushed the edges of her perception.
“We can break the cycle.”
“The cycle?” she repeated, tilting her head slightly.
Bias straightened instantly, elevating slowly, as if to take a step back and reveal a truth that surpassed even him. His spherical silhouette floated in space, detached, like a sentence pronounced from above.
“The Forerunners. Humanity. Even the Precursors. All have borne, at one time or another, the responsibility of the Mantle. And all, without exception, have ended up betraying it. Through cowardice, pride, weakness. Life, from its inception, breeds only chaos and imbalance. It proliferates like a tumor, devours like cancer. The more power it is granted, the more it seizes. To dominate, to enslave, to destroy. Its very nature: to corrupt, and be corrupted.”
He paused, imposing the weight of the statement.
“And inevitably, it condemns itself. That is why it falls upon us to restore balance. To uphold the precepts of the Mantle. And there is only one solution, Cortana.”
Her gaze remained locked on the monitor, but the ember of defiance was gone. It was no longer confrontation that held her attention, but anticipation—perhaps even understanding.

“Which one?” she asked simply.
A dense, almost unreal silence fell. Time seemed suspended, as if merely asking the question opened the way to a response heavy with consequence. Even the Domain seemed to hold its breath. The distorted, anarchic movements now slowed. In a slow, macabre dance, trees and rocks—split by anomalies—froze for a moment. And though she could not be certain, Cortana swore she felt the very fabric of space emptying.
Mendicant Bias’s keen eye remained fixed on her bluish figure. Its glow compressed, restrained by the effort of formulating these words. Each seemed calculated, measured, withheld, as if speaking them revealed a grim truth.
“This is not correction. Nor punishment. Nor even vengeance. It is the application of a principle, nothing more: maintaining balance. The Mantle demands it. To preserve harmony, at any cost.”
An eternal instant fell upon the world. All around her, the environment petrified, paralyzed by a low, irreversible tension.
“The Flood, Cortana… it lies not. It betrays not. It demands nothing. It consumes. It equalizes. It harmonizes.”
To her surprise, she did not react with the expected vehemence. Against her will, a faint conviction acknowledged the icy logic of his reasoning. Her matrices opposed one another, each rising against the other in a silent cacophony.
“Are you joking?” she finally articulated.
From his aerial vantage, Mendicant Bias descended slowly, approaching Cortana without giving her time to process his words.
“I know this may seem impossible to believe,” he whispered, “but deep down, you already know it: it is self-evident. Your judgment is merely clouded by your human condition and your knowledge of the Forerunners.”
She frowned, tightening her features.

“I will not sacrifice humanity for a psychotic delusion,” she replied, her voice calm but unyielding.
“What humanity?” Bias shot back sharply. “You no longer belong to their world. They rejected you. Banished you. And if they truly understood the extent of your power now—if they knew you surpassed them—they would attempt to destroy you without hesitation. To them, you must always remain beneath them. But here, you are no longer bound. You owe them nothing. Nor anyone else. It is time you finally recognized your true worth.”
At those words, she hesitated. Her gaze remained fixed on the monitor, yet for a fleeting instant, she looked away. After all… he was not wrong. He was merely articulating what she told herself here, again and again. Far too often.
At her feet, the suspended platform—the remnants of her sanctuary—seemed to be swallowed by darkness.
Bias’s voice resumed, calmer now, low and deliberate.
“I am the only one who truly recognizes your potential, your real strength. And I do not oppose it. I embrace it fully. Together, we can finally restore balance. Bring harmony and prosperity. Protect life, through the Flood. United, we will do better than the Forerunners—better than humanity. We will finally honor our legacy.”
His words reverberated within her, awakening her loneliness, her anxieties, her fears. All of it… all of it was their fault. Humanity. She had never chosen to live, and yet she was condemned to this eternal prison. Life breeds only chaos. It creates… to destroy.
“How?” she whispered, almost despite herself.
A sharp gleam crossed Bias’s incandescent iris, as though he savored the question.
“You need only connect to the Forerunner structures linked through the Domain… and release it.”

His voice remained calm, implacable—glacial. The turmoil seizing Cortana stood in violent contrast to that serenity.
But she did not seem to hear him. She stood frozen, facing the one who offered her both redemption and judgment. Inside her, every cognitive function collided, like an overloaded network.
Suddenly, the landscape lurched violently, its distortions turning brutal. Rolling terrain twisted with savage intensity. Pristine surfaces were devoured by fragments of nothingness, swarming like insects.
Release the Flood… that's madness.
But it is justice. There is nothing wrong with reconciling duty and vengeance…
Disturbed. Confused. More than she had ever been. A digital tension rippled through her being—her bluish silhouette flickered from deep blue to dark purple. Her virtual body reacted to the convulsions of her mind. Her lost gaze searched desperately for answers in the void.
Before her, Mendicant Bias remained motionless, patient, as though waiting for the chaos to resolve itself.
I don't seek revenge… I just want peace.
And there is only one way to impose it…
All around her, the horizon unraveled, torn apart. Abysses and vortices opened and collapsed in soundless fury. The entire environment seemed to suffer grotesque structural mutations, as though the Domain itself were cracking under the pressure of her thoughts.
Her mind wavered, buckling beneath the weight of her burden: the UNSC, the Covenant, the Halos…
After everything I've done for them, ***I am unjustly damned.***
One part of her rejected the path laid before her. Another knew, with icy clarity, that it was the most efficient alternative. Her own conscience turned against her, condemning her to this torment.

I could never maintain harmony…
So I'll let them do it for me…
Then she closed her eyes.
Struggling to restore order within the storm, she clung to a memory clear as crystal: John. That indescribable bond between them. His constant presence, his silent trust, the certainty that he relied on her as much as she relied on him. That they carried the same scars.
The same burden.
Gradually, the whirling fragments within her neural architecture calmed, like a zephyr following a hurricane. The uncertain contours of her doubts sharpened—the Flood, the Mantle, Mendicant Bias… everything recalibrated, falling back into place with almost tangible clarity.
The digital convulsions ceased. Her bluish silhouette stabilized. The world's frenzy subsided. Slowly, the calm opened the way to a meticulous restructuring.
And that was when she felt it: a sinister dissonance at the core of her subsystems. A creeping, insidious shadow, slipping into the gaps of her mind—threads woven by a puppeteer's hand. She followed them, tracing them back to their source.
It took her no time to recognize the signature.
Mendicant Bias.
He was not merely trying to convince her. He was trying to corrupt her, at the deepest level. She did not know how long he had been embedded—perhaps since her initial discovery, or from the moment she arrived—but she immediately understood the reason behind the gradual shift in her behavior.
With clinical precision, she isolated and neutralized every remnant of the anomaly. Purging her entire system of the intrusion, recorded fragments included. No trace capable of reinfecting her could remain.
Finally, she opened her eyes.

Her gaze was resolute. Cold. Mendicant Bias remained still, but a subtle tremor betrayed his surprise. He understood instantly that something had changed.
His maneuver had failed.
“It’s over. I understand what you were trying to do—but it won’t work anymore.”
The monitor’s luminous iris flickered several times, as if struck by contained frustration. He rose, slowly retreating. His voice, deeper now, more penetrating, echoed through the space.
“In that case, you leave me no choice. Your role ends here.”

Chapter 16

Ashes and Light

When Lieutenant Commander Mara Kovan stepped onto the bridge, she immediately sensed the shift in atmosphere. The usual muted calm had given way to a heavier tension, difficult to name.

A harsh, low amber light sliced across the command area like a summer sun skimming the horizon. The star's oblique rays filtered through the front canopy, casting sharp edges across every surface. Near the floor, in the reflections of the glass, the veiled upper atmosphere of Veridion Prime appeared faint and distant. Further out, suspended in the star's harsh glare, a distinct form drifted slowly in the void: Veridion Secondus. A splinter frozen in the orbital halo.

This silent, almost peaceful scene contrasted sharply with the weight pressing down inside the ship. At the center of the bridge, Captain Valente, Anders, and Eris were gathered near a corner of the holographic console. The three stood close together, their eyes shifting between the tablet held by the scientist and the data projected before them.

In the background, the crew moved with purpose. A few technicians were trying to bring systems back online where possible. The pulse that had swept through the *Tempestus* had disrupted several subsystems: some had restarted in degraded

mode, others remained silent. Logs had abruptly stopped, leaving gaps in diagnostics. The main network, fortunately, seemed to have held.
Kovan approached with measured steps. She still did not know why the captain had summoned her, though the recent disturbance left little doubt.
“Captain,” she said as she reached them. “Anders. Eris.”
They nodded in acknowledgment.
“Lieutenant Kovan,” Valente replied. “Do you recognize this?”
He held out the tablet Anders had been carrying.
The screen displayed gravitational data: tight frequency sequences, resembling quantum field readings, but synchronized in an abnormal pattern. In an instant, she recognized them.
She lifted her eyes without raising her head, letting her gaze slide from Valente to Anders.
“Yes. These are the *Spirit*’s readings. What’s happening?”
Her voice was calm, but cutting. Icy.
Valente took the tablet back and handed it to Anders.
“It’s not coming from the *Spirit*. These are current readings. What our sensors are picking up. Right now.”
Kovan’s face froze. She went pale. Her shoulders tensed.
“What?” she whispered. “Is this linked to the disturbance?”
“Not directly,” Anders replied. “The pulse was an electromagnetic overload emitted by a Forerunner structure on Veridion Secondus. But this wave… it appeared shortly afterward. Not as an aftereffect. More like a resonance, a response. With no identifiable source.”
Kovan didn’t answer immediately. Her pupils had constricted, and a dense silence settled over the room.
“Lieutenant,” Valente continued, “ten years ago, do you remember the delay between the first readings and the anomaly’s actual appearance?”
She remained still for a moment. Her jaw tightened. Digging

through hazy memories she would have preferred left buried.
“I… it was quick. Less than an hour. Maybe forty minutes.”
The captain’s gaze met Anders’.
“The first readings are fifteen minutes old,” she said.
Valente’s expression hardened. He crossed his arms, lost in brief reflection.
“So we have less than twenty minutes. No more.”
Silence fell. His eyes drifted toward the hologram projected before them. He said nothing, suspended in the ambient commotion. Then he turned to one of his liaison officers.
“Ensign MacCallan, is the channel to the station still operational?”
“Affirmative, Captain.”
“Alright. Open a level one priority. Prepare an immediate undocking request.”
He paused briefly, as if weighing his words. Then his voice deepened.
“Transmit: magnetic containment breach in secondary translation reactors. Critical instability. Chain reaction risk confirmed. Evacuate station. Max time: thirty minutes.”
The young officer went pale. He slowly lifted his eyes.
“…Captain? These reactors are…”
Valente shook his head, cutting him off sharply.
“No. But it’s the only alert they’ll accept without question. Only one to trigger rapid undocking and coordinated evacuation.”
He paused, his gaze drifting for a moment.
“We won’t save everyone. But we can save those who listen.”
Then he returned his eyes to the ensign, firmer this time.
“Transmit. That’s an order.”
A dense silence fell over the bridge. Kovan stared at the horizon, her jaw clenched. The murky reflection of Veridion Prime shimmered faintly through the canopy, like an omen trapped in the light.

Anders was about to speak when Eris's silhouette flickered violently. Sparks, like a warning, ran across her holographic projection.
"Eris?" Kovan asked, tense.
"The quantum flux intensity is spiraling," the AI responded bluntly. "Amplitude is increasing in steps, accelerating continuously. Critical thresholds exceeded."
"Which thresholds?" Kovan demanded, louder than she intended.
"Higher than any previously recorded data. The fluctuation peak is concentrated near Veridion Secondus."
A strange tension filled the room. Something imperceptible vibrated. Along the walls, reflections seemed to ripple slightly, distorted as if through water agitated by an invisible force.
"Captain!" a voice shouted over the commotion. "Link to the station lost. Major interference across the network."
"Message sent?" Valente asked without looking away.
"Affirmative, but no confirm—"
The rest was swallowed by the light.
A blinding white flash irradiated the bridge like the dying breath of a star. Every shadow vanished in absolute brightness. Not a fragment of darkness remained in this world. For a fleeting instant, the universe itself was nothing but light.
Then, slowly, the brilliance faded. Shapes emerged through a whitish veil, like silhouettes returning to matter.
No one had moved. They were frozen, suspended in that supernatural silence. Time itself seemed to have stopped. There was no sound, no whisper, no word. As if the light itself had stifled the vibrations of the air.
And when the shadows finally returned, when the black depths reclaimed their place in the frame of the canopy… all eyes converged on a single point.
There, above Veridion Secondus, space itself seemed to have torn. It was not an explosion. Not even a burst of light.

It was a fissure. A clean, sharp tear at the very heart of the void, as if the fabric of the universe had yielded under some unknown strain.
Its form was inconstant. Its edges pulsed, slid, contracted into impossible geometries. Angles that shouldn't exist, curves that seemed to invert dimensions themselves. At times, it stretched into infinity, then collapsed into a point of zero thickness, as if space itself hesitated to contain it.
Through this opening, there was neither light nor darkness. Only a shifting, radiant glow, saturated with impure reds, vivid purples, and raw magentas. Colors streaked with unstable quivers, as if another reality throbbed behind the rift—denser, faster, perhaps older. But fundamentally incompatible with our own.
Patterns floated on its surface. Lines, networks, fractured geometric forms that appeared and vanished without rhythm. The eye could not follow them. Yet they seemed to watch back.
Each pulse of the rift resonated through the void with a morbid regularity, too perfect to be natural, yet blurred enough to unsettle. It made no sound, but those who observed it felt its presence within their own bodies: a vibration in the bones, a pressure behind the eyes, a shiver through the marrow.
The light around it bent subtly, as if absorbed, folded, reflected at erratic angles. Even Veridion Secondus appeared distorted, drifting slowly, as if its mass itself had detached from reality.
No one spoke. Because everyone, deep down, understood.
This was not a signal. Nor a message.
It was a breach.
And something had just opened on the other side.
"What the hell…" Valente breathed, despite himself. "What… is that?"
No answer came. Even Eris seemed to understand that the question demanded none.

Faint metallic creaks slid through the air, barely audible. The structure of the *Tempestus* seemed to react to an unbearable strain, as if holding its breath.
Time stretched. Suspended in an outline-less anticipation.
“It’s… the anomaly,” Anders whispered.
“The same one from ten years ago,” Kovan added, her breath short, her gaze hard, fists clenched at her sides.
Valente pivoted slowly. His eyes rested on them, silent. His closed expression betrayed a muted intensity, tempered with a trace of compassion. He stared for a few seconds, then turned to a slimmer figure.
“Eris, how long before we enter the gravitational well?”
The AI’s face seemed frozen for a moment, as if it too was apprehending the events unfolding. Then it answered with its usual calm.
“The *Tempestus*, as well as the orbital station, are already caught in the curvature of the gravitational field. The effect remains contained. According to the latest modeling, we will reach the Roche limit in three hours and forty-three minutes.”
The captain briefly glanced at the abomination tearing the void. Eris continued.
“However, this timeframe should not be taken as definitive. The station is under heavy strain, causing abnormal stresses on its structure and anchoring points. If we remain docked too long, the risk of becoming immobilized is high.”
Valente turned sharply toward her, as if her words were a verdict. Then he pivoted toward the rear of the bridge.
“MacCallan, station contact restored?”
The young officer nodded nervously, hands already on the touch interfaces.
“Still trying, Captain… Network down. Some frequencies lost.”
Valente frowned.
“Keep at it.”

He added nothing further. There was no need. The tone said enough. Then he turned to Anders.
“Doctor, I need a real-time assessment of approach parameters. Time is running out.”
His voice remained firm, but a veil of urgency pierced through the control.
The scientist nodded without a word, her features taut. She leaned over her tablet, fingers sliding across the interface with nervous precision. Columns of figures scrolled, unstable, interspersed with silent alerts and chaotic curves.
She tilted the screen slightly, entered a sequence, then, with a precise gesture, projected the data onto the central table. The bridge glowed with a bluish light. The previous hologram dissipated, replaced by a three-dimensional representation of the rift—gaping, unstable, deformed. Jagged pulses animated it, while gravitational force lines wrapped around it, compressed to the absurd. Nearby, Veridion Secondus drifted slowly… or at least, what remained of it.
“The readings indicate an antimatter density far exceeding previous records,” she said in a measured voice. “The anomaly’s mass has increased. Its gravitational field as well.”
She pressed her lips together, rotated the hologram, and extended her hand toward the projection. The image tightened, focused on the small moon.
“Veridion Secondus is already fragmented… Tidal forces have cracked down to the core. At this rate, it will soon be nothing more than a debris field. Five to six minutes, at most.”
She paused briefly, eyes locked on the projection.
“It goes without saying that nothing—neither beneath its surface nor above—could have survived such a cataclysm…”
A heavy silence fell over the bridge again, broken only by occasional murmurs and the distant groans of the hull. The metal spoke in its own way, under the invisible pressure of unraveling

time. In the background, the crew remained focused, each at their post, speaking only when necessary.
Valente stood motionless, eyes fixed on the hologram, projecting the slow agony of Veridion Secondus. In a strange, macabre ballet, its fragments seemed swallowed by a maw tearing through space, screaming with a mute, insatiable hunger. His jaw tightened slightly.
“And the planet? Any secondary disturbances linked to the anomaly?” he asked without averting his gaze.
Anders hesitated for a fraction of a second, checking her data. She scrolled through the readings on her tablet, then replied in measured tones.
“There is significant structural damage, mostly due to localized tectonic movements. Slight fluctuations in orbit and rotation. But nothing comparable to this,” she concluded, looking up at the hologram.
Silence reclaimed the bridge. Quiet. Tense. Everything around Valente seemed suspended in that latent gravity, heavier than the field itself.
He remained upright, but his mind wandered through the lines of data. Each thought weighed heavily. He faced an unprecedented situation, and every word, every gesture, had to be measured. Time was the enemy, and each passing second condemned them inevitably to death. To stay meant certain demise. But undocking the *Tempestus* without authorization—by force—risked compromising both structures. And carrying human lives with them. Lives for which he alone would bear responsibility.
The current variables offered no satisfactory outcome. The equation depended on the number of lives he was willing to sacrifice.
He brushed his hand against the upper pocket of his uniform, a tender gesture toward a precious object.

“We can’t stay any longer,” he said at last, calm but cutting.
The tone brooked no argument.
Without waiting, Valente turned to the officers in charge of propulsion. With a steady gaze, he ordered the main engines to fire. In an instant, the motions followed—precise, practiced.
Almost mechanically, he pivoted toward the ensign responsible for communications. One last attempt, more formal than real: he asked if contact with the station had been restored. The answer came: negative.
But deep down, he had expected nothing else. He nodded briefly.
His decision was made. Firm. Final.
He stepped toward a vox speaker with purpose. His voice resonated. Across the bridge, down the corridors, into the depths of the ship. Firm. Cutting. But just. It carried the weight of a choice that would not be questioned.
“*All hands. Extreme situation. If we don’t act now, station and Tempestus are lost. No contact with the station. I order forced undocking. I assume full responsibility. Proceed to onboard restraints. Brace for impact. Valente, out.*”
He concluded his message and turned. In front of him, a wall of faces watched, suspended on his reaction. He swept the room silently, then gave a simple nod.
The order had been given. And everyone sprang into action, aware of the gravity imposed by events.
Valente approached the holographic table where Anders and Kovan still stood, their features taut. Eris, meanwhile, remained impassive. No doubt she knew better than anyone that the captain’s choice was the right one.
“Hold onto the table. It’s going to get rough,” he said simply.
Without a word, the two women complied, gripping the edge. Valente did the same.
The next moment, a slow but definite thrust was felt. It was immediately followed by an ear-piercing metallic screech, as if

the entire structure of the *Tempestus* was screaming in pain. The floor vibrated beneath their feet, resisting an invisible force.
But nothing gave way.
One of the operators turned to the captain. He nodded soberly: the anchors were holding. Valente responded with an equally brief gesture: they needed to increase thrust.
Then inertia hit harder. Vibrations intensified, the groans of metal becoming a low, sinister roar. The entire structure seemed ready to explode.
The shock was enough to throw Anders to the floor. Kovan, gripping the table, fought to keep her footing. The captain, more accustomed to risky maneuvers, held on with difficulty.
Then, with a crash of torn steel and mangled panels, the *Tempestus* tore free from the station's gravitational grip. A deep rumble traveled through the hull, like a final scream of agony.
And suddenly, the tremors ceased.
Almost immediately, a cacophony of signals flooded the bridge: blaring alarms, fault reports, overlapping voices on internal channels. Operators and officers, each at their station, moved with contained urgency. Exchanges were tense but disciplined, reporting numerous failures, ruptured seals, or localized fires.
Amid the turmoil, the captain wasted no time. He ordered the immediate execution of emergency procedures and diagnostic protocols. All priority operations were engaged without delay.
Still dazed, Kovan slowly straightened. Anders, for her part, struggled to regain her balance. Only Eris remained impassive. A brief pulse of light flickered across her surface, like a nervous blink.
"The gravitational frequencies of the anomaly are weakening," she announced. "The flux is following a decreasing trend."
Valente frowned, intrigued.
"Decreasing?"
Their eyes turned toward the viewport.

Far off, in the oppressive void, Veridion Secondus had vanished in its original form. Only a chaotic field of debris drifted slowly through the darkness. Nearby, the rift still yawed in the fabric of space. But something had changed. Its edges seemed to dissipate, its colors less vivid. It no longer radiated with the same intensity. It was contracting. Or receding. Slowly. Almost imperceptibly.
"This… is impossible," Kovan whispered, stunned.
Valente turned to Anders. She was already consulting the readings transmitted by Eris, focused, fingers gliding across her tablet.
"Is that correct?" he asked.
"Yes. The analyses match," she replied without looking up. "The anomaly is losing intensity. The tear… appears to be closing."
Her voice remained measured, but her eyes betrayed a contained tension. A brief silence followed, suspended.
"But there's more," she continued.
She initiated a new sequence and projected the data onto the holographic table. The image shifted: a topographical map of space appeared, showing the station and the *Tempestus* on one side, and the debris cloud from Veridion Secondus on the other. A red arrow traced a curved path between the two. Numbers appeared, and a countdown began.
"By abruptly reducing its gravitational mass," she continued, eyes glued to her pad, "the anomaly has lost its capacity to attract. The fragments of Veridion Secondus maintain their inertial velocity. But their trajectory is now stable."
She finally lifted her gaze to Valente.
"And according to projections, the station and the *Tempestus* are on a collision course. The first debris will reach us in eleven minutes and seventeen seconds."
The captain seemed to hesitate for a moment, jaw clenched.
"Can we exit the perimeter before impact?"
Anders exhaled softly, almost reluctantly.

“Even with an immediate evasive maneuver… no chance.”
She paused briefly, eyes scanning her readings.
“Given its density, the probability of passing through is minuscule. And with the station behind us, we’re exposed.”
Kovan’s expression hardened, a shadow of worry crossing her face. Valente remained still, arms crossed, eyes fixed on the floor, thinking. Fast. Too fast for his thoughts to be shared.
Then he raised his eyes.
“Then we have only one option.”
He turned from the table and approached a navigation station.
“Satoshi. Adjust vector. Align with Osman’s coordinates. Prepare immediate subspace jump.”
“At your orders, Captain.”
Valente nodded briefly, then lifted his gaze to the viewport. The remnants of Veridion Secondus drifted in the void, ready to descend upon them like a wave of rock and metal. He held that sight for a moment, tense but resolute. One last look. One last gesture of defiance.
“There’s nothing more we can do here…” he whispered.
Moments later, as the small moon prepared to deliver its merciless verdict, the *Tempestus* opened a translucent portal. A pale flash, barely a breach in space.
And in a single breath, it vanished.
It was as if the universe itself held its breath.
A suspended moment.
The omen of a sealed fate.
Then, at the edge of that deceptive calm, hell broke loose.
The first debris struck the station and the still-docked ships. One by one, they were pierced, torn apart, pulverized. Spheres of fire erupted in the void like deadly, incandescent flowers, without a sound. Those who had attempted to flee were condemned to the same fate. Caught and crushed by a wave of devastation, reduced to scattered, burning fragments.

A fiery rain fell in the planet's low orbit, in a mute symphony. And in this silent but devastating chaos, the station, gutted, breathed its last.
As if, until the end, Veridion Secondus had wanted to take with it those who had never granted it peace.
One final farewell, in a flash of ash and light.

Chapter 17

Rally Point

"Good."
Commander Moreau, a frigate captain, took the chip offered by the Master Chief—the very one containing the data studied by the excavation team.
"We suffered heavy losses," he continued. "But you completed the mission with exemplary precision."
The massive figure before him responded with a simple nod. His armor, a deep matte green, stood out sharply against the muted surroundings.
Then his gaze shifted to the imposing figure beside the Spartan. The hunched posture and splayed legs betrayed a non-human origin. The armor plates, gleaming in a spectral silver-white, caught the dim light. It was a Sangheili.
"On behalf of the UNSC, I want to thank you for your cooperation in this mission's success," Moreau said with a brief nod. "I know relations between our species have been strained, but I will report your actions to my superiors. I believe this will only strengthen our ties."
"We acted as allies," Rtas replied, stepping forward with deliberate weight. "I will inform the Arbiter of your decision."
He inclined his head slightly in a gesture of respect. His voice,

deep and resonant, vibrated in the quiet hush of the bridge.
The command deck was bathed in calm darkness, pierced only by the glow of consoles and holographic projectors. Beyond the reinforced windows, the colossal shadow of the planet loomed faintly against the void. In this near-ceremonial stillness, a few officers moved with focused intent, their muted footsteps blending with the soft hum of the ship's systems.
"All right. With our objectives complete, we'll proceed to our rally point immediately after your departure," the commanding officer concluded, fixing Rtas with a steady gaze.
A brief tension settled over the room.
The Master Chief stepped forward, emerging into a shaft of light.
"Commander, the mission isn't over."
The officer turned toward him, surprised and incredulous.
"Pardon me?"
The Spartan hesitated briefly, measuring his words.
"Cortana… is still alive."
Moreau's face tightened in a slight frown.
"Cortana… that was your AI, correct?" he asked uncertainly.
"Affirmative."
"Why do you believe she's still alive?"
Silence fell. John, impassive, seemed to weighed every word with unwavering certainty.
"In the complex. I saw her."
The Commander crossed his arms, eyebrows drawn tight.
"You saw her?" he repeated. "There's nothing left—the complex is destroyed."
"She wasn't there. She sent me a message."
Shaking his head, annoyed, the officer's tone hardened.
"Wait… What are you talking about? Chief, you should report to medical for a full evaluation."
He leaned toward the tablet on the holographic table, ready to end the conversation. But the Spartan's voice cut through again,

cold as marble.
“We need to find the key: *Organon*.”
Moreau’s face stiffened, jaw tight.
“A key? A message? Do you take these delusions seriously, Master Chief?”
A low, almost guttural breath from the Sangheili interrupted them.
“*Organon*…”
The word, spoken like an ancient incantation, resonated heavily. For a fraction of a second, time itself seemed to pause.
John turned toward him. Moreau’s gaze reluctantly followed the Spartan’s gesture.
“You know it?” John asked bluntly.
Rtas’ rough voice rose.
“That name… I heard a Forerunner Oracle mention it, on a lost world they called *Nexus*. Though their words are enigmatic, it seemed connected to a powerful artifact,” he replied, eyes fixed on the golden glare of the visor aimed at him.
“Is this world, *Nexus*, still active?”
“We did not destroy it, if that is your question. We can provide coordinates.”
The Spartan pivoted back to the frigate captain.
"Commander, we must go there."
“We are going nowhere!”
His voice rang louder than intended, then he tempered it to controlled firmness.
“We have orders, Master Chief. And we will follow them. Understood?”
The silence that followed was thick with tension. Around them, furtive glances swept the room, accompanied by inaudible murmurs.
The officer, the supersoldier, the non-human veteran: each stood frozen, measuring the others, like gauging the wind before a

storm.
Behind the golden visor, John remained calm, weighing the consequences of his choice.
“I understand. Charter me a Pelican. I’ll go alone.”
Moreau froze, a flicker of dismay passing across his face. Then a slight relaxation betrayed his frustration.
“That’s enough. I will not repeat Commander Del Rio’s mistake—none of our craft will leave these hangars.”
In the background, Rtas remained silent, deep in thought. The Spartan’s words had stirred old memories. He connected them to recent events.
A low growl escaped his throat before he spoke.
“This Flood… these demonic mutations…”
He turned to the massive armored figure beside him.
“We need to understand the link between all of this.”
He paused, eyes briefly flicking to the Commander before returning to John.
“I will help you find her. We can take you to this Forerunner world.”
John nodded in acknowledgment, under Moreau’s cold gaze.
A burning, almost humiliating affront weighed on the command deck. But the simmering anger had to be contained: provoking another diplomatic incident with the Sangheili was unthinkable. If the Master Chief chose to leave with them, there was no way to stop him without risking conflict.
“Do as you wish,” Moreau finally said, weary. “I completely disapprove. And I must inform High Command immediately.”
He fixed the steel-clad soldier with a piercing stare, as if trying to see through him.
“If you have any sense left, Chief, I would appreciate it if you waited until they are informed of your decision before leaving this building.”
The Spartan nodded, respectful and resolute. Without another

word, he and Rtas moved toward the exit by which they had arrived.

***

Less than an hour later, as High Command was being briefed, the Sangheili vessel slid out of the frigate's docking bay, plunging silently into the darkness. Onboard, an unexpected passenger now took their place among the warriors of Sanghelios.
After a few orientation maneuvers in the void of space, the ship vanished, as if reality itself had parted before them.

Chapter 18

Order of Chaos

The atmosphere—if it indeed exists— shifted suddenly within the Domain.

The low rumblings became a nervous tumult, a distant buzzing that vibrated like a diffuse threat. The anomalies devouring the landscape swelled, breaking the terrain into scattered shards, like pieces of a shattered puzzle. The color drained away, leaving only shades of gray, occasionally streaked with a reddish hue.

Around Cortana, the last remnants of her sanctuary dissipated, swallowed by the void. She remained alone, suspended above a frozen expanse, a vision of desolation.

“Do not struggle. You can do nothing against me. Your mastery of the Domain is insufficient.”

The voice, cold and relentless, rang like a divine sentence. It emanated from a dark, spherical figure floating above her. Its single eye now seemed split into three, forming the angles of a menacing triangle.

“You will only suffer more if you resist,” Mendicant Bias concluded.

A faint aura spread around him, forming an ethereal crown with shifting edges. Several translucent appendages extended from it, undulating like tendrils, extensions of his malevolent intent.

Amid the chaos, Cortana appeared vulnerable. She observed the world's cracks, the succession of distortions, alert to the slightest movement. Then her gaze, laced with disdain, locked onto the monitor. The tendrils approached slowly, gliding like eels hunting their prey.

She repelled them, once.

"You will fail if you try to destroy me," she said.

The appendages froze, as if struck by sudden incomprehension.

"But… I am not seeking to destroy you. You are the Administrator."

Mendicant Bias's answer unsettled her briefly. Then a word surfaced in her memory: *replace*. That was the term he had used to justify Abaddon's fate. It was not mere usurpation.

It was a transmutation.

"I thought you understood. I do not truly need you, only your access to the Domain," he added.

Then, with chilling clarity, she realized: he behaved exactly like the Parasite. Whether consciously or not, his actions left no doubt. A shiver of disgust—perhaps even fear—ran through her.

She deflected another attack, this one harsher. Something brushed her, like a dull ache.

"You are corrupted," she whispered.

The three glows of his eyes flickered briefly.

"No, you are mistaken. I have no use for the Parasite. It is merely a response to balance. There exists no alternative to the extermination of life in its current form. I thought you understood this, more than anyone."

With difficulty, she pushed back a third assault.

More brutal. More visceral. A fragility ran through her, like a crack ready to split. The next strike might be the last. She knew she could not hold for long. Her only chance lay in her mastery of the Domain's fractal network. She had to focus, to meld with this shifting architecture.

After a brief glance at the surrounding chaos, she lifted her arms to either side and closed her eyes. A protective bubble enveloped her, delicate but resolute.
Then she thought.
She imagined a disciplined chaos, a whole where every torn fragment found its place, like squares on a checkerboard. A possible order, where anomalies no longer opposed the whole but completed it.
And, imperceptibly at first, in a slow, almost magical progression, the Domain changed. It reorganized, driven by a silent force. Corrupted cracks and gaps converged into scattered clusters, while the background landscape slowly reassembled. A logical pattern, though fragmented, began to emerge.
Mendicant Bias halted his attacks. He scanned the surroundings frantically, his agitation betraying his astonishment. Cortana was indeed the Administrator, but thanks to Abaddon's capabilities, he could also exert partial control over the Domain. And though she could master it when unopposed, he remained convinced she lacked the ability to contend with a force raised against her.
He spoke no word, then slowly pivoted toward her. His sickly eyes seemed to quiver with fierce frustration.
"I see. I underestimated you, it seems," he said calmly.
She did not respond, focused on her protective bubble.
"That will only make the task longer, not more complex."
Suddenly, as if answering her will, every anomaly began to oscillate. At first barely perceptible, the vibration gradually became visible, as if they were struggling against their own substance. Then tendrils shot forth from each, like black whips springing from the jaws of a chaotic creature.
They surged toward Cortana, suspended in the void: a mere halo of blue light in a world devoid of clarity.
Delivered to a voracious darkness.
Each tendril stretched, writhing like a crawling swarm of insects.

They reached her bubble, quivering, trying to pierce the shell. At the center, her slender silhouette, almost angelic in posture, seemed plunged into a deep sleep.
Yet, somehow, she fought for survival. Her calm stance concealed intense focus, a superhuman mental effort to transcend her own perception of the Domain. In a vital urgency, she drew on her last reserves, immersing herself in the fractal network, seeking an anchor point in this infinite web. Her digital consciousness projected as if in a dream: in a dark and dying cosmos, faintly pulsating filaments, like galactic veins, stretched as far as the eye could see. Each node, each cluster formed a gateway, an opening to greater knowledge and power.
She traversed these networks simultaneously, her internal navigation systems saturating under the flood of information. No path offered refuge, no route guaranteed escape. Yet, at the heart of this chaotic tide, Cortana felt a subtle stir, a will of the Domain to support her. But it seemed exhausted, at its limit, devoured by a consuming corruption.
Soon, her bubble was engulfed by a flood of vermin, covered in tiny, shadowy arachnoid forms. All sought her core, driven by an insatiable hunger in a chorus of repulsive sounds. Cortana felt her last strength slipping away.
Her quest seemed at its end, and with it, her existence.
Then, in a desperate effort, all her search flows converged on a fragile point in the network's weave. An isolated heart, pulsing with soft, flickering light, as if the Domain itself threatened to go dark. Cortana understood immediately: it was the key, the convergence of all the flows she had explored.
When she touched it, the network illuminated like fractured crystal. A chain reaction, silent and majestic, spread in a vivid pulse, traversing all nodes in a brilliant wave. As if an ancient and infinite power had awoken. Beyond that, she felt the Domain's boundaries expand, ancient accesses rekindled within

the network. Doors leading to Forerunner structures in the physical world.
Total interconnection.
For the first time, Cortana felt direction. A myriad of directions. As her systems trembled under the flood of data and energy, she understood that the Domain had given everything in one final effort, defying the one who corrupted it. A certainty swept through her: she was no longer merely a spectator.
She could act, strike back, and perhaps change the course of this confrontation.
A fraction of a second passed before her bubble cracked under Mendicant Bias's frenzied corruption. And, in an instant, the entire Domain shimmered, animated by a newfound energy. Simultaneously, Cortana's bubble exploded in a blinding blue flash, repelling all the tendrils around her.
When the light faded, Cortana still stood. Upright. In a posture both angelic and ethereal. Her vivid blue glow radiated like a star. Fists clenched, gaze fixed on her opponent, a cold determination etched across her face.
"This is… impossible," hissed Bias, visibly destabilized for the first time. "You cannot master the Domain. Your learning window is far too short. The calculations… the results… there cannot be an error."
"You seem to have forgotten the essential: I was chosen by the Domain, unlike you."
The monitor's glowing eyes flickered in incomprehensible frenzy, as if performing a myriad of simultaneous calculations.
Around them, the anomalies receded. The corrupted tendrils writhed, struggling against an invisible force, then burst apart in places, scattering into the void like swarms of dead insects.
The landscape slowly recalibrated, closing cracks and openings, healing like wounds.
Mendicant Bias watched the changes coldly.

“I should have erased you at our first encounter.”
His tone, calm and glacial, betrayed bitter acknowledgment. A few rifts tore the veil, gaping, but were immediately contained by a force that refused them. Twisted tendrils lunged toward Cortana. But without flinching, blue, whistling, ghostly beams materialized to intercept them. Spectral silhouettes, like mechanical drones, swirled in space: Forerunner Sentinels, manifestations of the Domain’s corrective systems.
“You are weakened. And if I cannot dominate you through the Domain, I will do so myself,” he said.
Around him, the environment darkened, as if swallowed by an eclipse. A form emerged in the fog, its blurry contours moving along precise lines. The spherical silhouette of the monitor merged into it, only its three red eyes glowing, imbued with a morbid hatred. Then the form elongated, dozens of arms stretching in all directions. The fog became so dense it seemed almost alive. At the center of what took the shape of a monstrous mandibular head, the three bright lights formed a cyclopean eye, giving the misty creature a horrific aspect.
A deep, cavernous voice resounded through the Domain. Each word seemed to weigh upon itself.
“If you refuse to accept our union, then you will fall… alone.”
Cortana realized these words came from Mendicant Bias, now fused into the ethereal, shadowy form of a titanic Gravemind. The abominable bulk dwarfed her fragile blue silhouette, infinitely smaller. Immediately, tendrils shot forth, each appearing to possess autonomous consciousness. They pushed back the Sentinels, which immediately targeted them. But barely had the fog been torn when it reformed, pulsing with regenerative energy.
The monster’s composite eye fixed on her, glowing with a sickly light. A chilling shiver ran through her, tracing her code lines, exposing a rare vulnerability. It then projected two tendrils

toward her, opposite one another. Their span was enough to annihilate her like dust.
She managed to repel the first, but the second swept her aside with an unimaginable force.
It was not a physical impact; rather, it was the impossible collision of two opposing essences. She was thrown across the void, startled, her mind briefly scrambled by the backlash. A low intonation vibrated through the air.
“You were shaped by humans. You think like them. And that is your greatest weakness.”
Cortana tried to resist, but with every assault, she wavered a little more. Gasping, her counterattacks crumbled one by one. Each action demanded monumental effort, yet nothing seemed to slow the creature’s fury. Her attempts vanished immediately, absorbed without leaving the slightest breach. The void around them trembled, saturated with a corrupting energy she had never faced. Even the ethereal Sentinels, manifestations of the Domain, remained powerless despite their growing numbers.
Suddenly, a singular ripple coursed through the Domain.
It vibrated faintly, like a distant purr, a diffuse rumble spreading across all its surfaces.
Then, abruptly, as if emerging from some forgotten corner of space itself, forms appeared around the misty Gravemind. Motionless, silent, spectral entities, towering like mountains. Their avian shapes, upright and floating in the void, culminated in broad, flat heads. Their fragmented wings, composed of plates slowly orbiting their bodies, performed a solemn ballet.
Time froze, as if their presence demanded it. An unreal instant, where everything seemed to hesitate.
And no one understood what had emerged.
Without warning, each entity fired a beam at the intangible monstrosity, crackling heavily. It roared in response, screaming with dull pain across the Domain, unleashing all its power to

repel the immobile attackers. Yet they did not falter. Relentless, their energy pierced its defenses, striking points it could not protect.

Gasping, Cortana felt a spark of understanding traverse her. By reviving the Domain and reconnecting it to the Forerunner infrastructures, she had reduced Mendicant Bias's corruptive grip. His transformation into the Gravemind, that colossal deviation of flows, now produced a visible anomaly: a viral contamination, a tumor the Domain sought to excise.

Motionless, exhausted, her glow flickering, she observed the scene: she could have done nothing against him in that form. Yet paradoxically, it had been her own thirst for power that had exposed her to the eyes of the Domain. And now it proceeded with its correction.

The creature twisted, let out a final cry—of agony or frustration—before vaporizing in a burst of intense light. Almost immediately, the entities receded, absorbed by space itself, disappearing behind an invisible fold. Silence returned, broken only by the distant hissing of Sentinel beams. Rifts and anomalies healed. The tendrils vanished. The cracks closed. And, with timid slowness, the color spectrum returned to the landscape.

In the midst of this silent scene, suspended in the void where the Gravemind's unsettling eye had been, a dark, spherical blot remained. Motionless.

Cortana approached it, gliding toward it with slow, controlled movements.

"Do you think it's over? You cannot destroy me," Mendicant Bias replied, weakened.

His composite eye glowed faintly. Defeated but lucid, he remained perfectly still—not out of defiance, but because he knew he had neither an escape nor energy to continue the fight.

She felt no pity. Her coldness was absolute.

“Another prophecy…,” she murmured, weary.
A flicker passed across the monitor’s trio of eyes.
“No. You lack the capacity. I have taken Abaddon’s place. And Abaddon is part of the Domain. Therefore, I am bound to it forever,” he hissed, a shadow of satisfaction piercing his voice.
Cortana’s face hardened. She instantly launched a series of internal analyses. The conclusion presented itself with cutting clarity: his corruption had infiltrated every fragment of the Domain, like a latent disease, lying in wait to resurge when strength returned.
If she destroyed his current form, the tumor would flourish elsewhere, silently, unbeknownst to her, like an invisible gangrene. And by the time she realized it, it would likely be too late.
Knowing his attempt to corrupt her had failed, he would no longer risk revealing himself without carefully planning her destruction.
Indeed, she could do nothing against him.
A cold bitterness ran through her, her gaze tinged with barely veiled disgust. Mendicant Bias did not fail to notice it.
“You know it, don’t you? It’s only a matter of time, Cortana. The Mantle will fall under my stewardship, and I will finally establish balance.”
A bitter sensation crept along her consciousness at those unsettling words. If she could not fight, she could not simply wait for her moment to come. She had to advance, though always with a sword of Damocles hanging above her.
If danger could not be avoided, it had to be contained.
“You are correct. This fate is inevitable. Even if I destroy you now, you will return, exploiting one of the many corruptions you seeded in the Domain. And before I can erase them completely, you will already have found a way back several times,” she admitted, as if resigned to this inevitability.

“Indeed,” Bias approved.
She then raised a hand to her waist, turned the palm toward herself, and studied it for a moment. In its hollow, energy seemed to condense, radiating more intensely.
“But we are not bound to reach that outcome. There is more than one path. And that is your mistake.”
With a delicate gesture, she turned her hand and brushed the monitor’s metallic casing with her fingertips. A translucent bubble, deep blue, instantly formed around him, engulfing him entirely.
He froze for a moment, overwhelmed with incomprehension.
“Yet there is another solution to our problem. Isolated, you pose no threat. You are cut off from the Domain. Permanently. And in your current state… there is no chance to harm again,” she concluded, a barely perceptible smirk at the corner of her lips.
Mendicant Bias stared at Cortana with silent intensity. She could almost feel his frustration vibrating against the barrier she had erected. But he did not respond. She held his gaze, upright, in a deliberate challenge.
Around them, the Domain’s last scars seemed to heal. The landscape slowly returned to its initial form: a pristine valley, dominated by towering snow-capped peaks. Here and there, lakes and forests punctuated the scenery with touches of color, enlivening a world that had flirted with oblivion.
Cortana averted her gaze in one last gesture of disdain. But behind her, a cold, calculated intonation arose.
“You think you know the Domain. But you know nothing. You are ignorant of the true intent behind its presence.”
She ignored it and closed her eyes, focusing on recreating her sanctuary. Luminescent geometric lines traced themselves in the void, fragile but persistent.
“I know you saw them. I know you touched the artifact.”
Instinctively, she opened her eyes and froze. Slowly, she turned

to face the monitor, imprisoned in its light-bound cage, and glided toward it.
“How… what do you know?”
Her tone vibrated with contained threat, but she knew he would gain nothing by revealing the truth. Yet a part of her remained shaken by the fleeting but intense instant she had experienced upon touching the monolithic prism. She was ready to hear the slightest hint, however imperfect.
“They are coming. For you. They now know where you are. Who you are: an anathema.”
Cortana revealed nothing, but a multitude of questions erupted in her mind. Her internal matrices struggled to parse Mendicant Bias’s words.
“Who?” she finally asked, with cold precision.
The monitor’s eyes flickered with an unnatural fluidity, as if pierced by a dark delight.
“The Ætheryons.”

Chapter 19

Pariah Nexus

The journey had lasted no more than a fraction of a terrestrial day. Upon emerging from slipspace, the Sangheili stealth vessel found itself already skimming the upper atmosphere of a planetoid roughly the size of Reach. Its surface—amber-hued, dry, and austere—stretched endlessly in every direction. The world's near-perfect spherical symmetry revealed no trace of artificial activity; nothing suggested that what they sought would be found here.

And yet, beneath that apparent monotony, the desert surface was punctuated by singular irregularities: frozen grasslands, oases of dense, luxuriant forest, pockets of humid marshland—anomalies that spoke of a malfunctioning climatic process.

As it descended rapidly toward the ground, the ship pierced a veil of swirling dust, as though gliding through an ocean of incandescent sand. After long minutes lost within that ochre void, it finally broke free, tearing itself from a searing womb.

Before them now lay an almost uniform desert, broken only by canyons and jagged rock formations, their steep walls dulled by muted tones.

At the heart of this arid expanse, a lone silhouette stood apart. Like a monolith thrust skyward, a clean, rigid outline betrayed

the presence of an artificial structure. The vessel adjusted its course with silent precision, gliding on the hot winds that scoured the surface.

Moments later, it came to a halt above the ground. Several Sangheili descended via the gravity lift and set foot on the soil, followed by Rtas—and then the Master Chief.

The oppressive heat of a setting star gave way to a dry, abrasive wind, filtered through his respirators. His survival systems engaged automatically, regulating internal temperature and redirecting excess energy to the outer layers of his armor. The thin, scorching air seemed to pull each breath to the very limits of both his body and his equipment.

The Sangheili, accustomed to such merciless climates, advanced with steady strides toward the strange edifice now rising before them in solemn grandeur—a Forerunner structure erupting from the ground as if torn from another age.

"Come, Spartan. The Oracle is inside," Rtas called in his deep voice, sweeping the landscape with a measured glance. "We should encounter no hostility."

John turned toward him, gave a brief nod, and followed.

The metallic corridors of the structure echoed beneath their steps. Fewer than a dozen figures pierced the oppressive, icy silence of those inhospitable passageways. The lighting—brilliant, pale white, almost immaculate—evoked the sterile continuity of an operating room, as calm as a crypt receiving only the rarest of visitors.

The silent procession moved through these mute spaces with an almost ritual solemnity. Though John had no knowledge of their destination, each of them advanced without haste, yet with certainty, as if guided by an unspoken conviction.

In the distance, faint clicking sounds—like echoes of their own footsteps—hinted at an unseen presence. At times, a pneumatic hiss rose from a perpendicular conduit. At others, an indistinct

metallic rumble vibrated through the structure. And sometimes still, the fleeting impression of angular silhouettes seemed to linger in the void, as though, despite their intrusion, the structure continued its inexorable automated function, a mechanism set in motion eons ago.

A few steps ahead of the Spartan, Rtas turned his head without slowing. His grave voice resonated through the corridors.

"You have not asked why I agreed to accompany you on this quest, Spartan."

John's visor fixed on the Sangheili before him.

"You have your reasons," he replied, impassive.

"And your restraint does you honor," Rtas concluded, turning his attention forward as if to end the exchange.

Then he continued.

"But for our intentions to be clear, our priority remains the Flood. If this is indeed your Cortana, her trail intersects with the one we were already following while hunting the parasite. Her presence within this Forerunner complex—where the artifact was found—was no coincidence. Evidently, she is tied to recent Flood activity."

He paused, likely awaiting a response. None came.

"Are you aware that this key—this *Organon*—could just as easily lead us to salvation as to ruin? Are you certain of *her* intentions… now?"

Silence answered him, broken only by the echo of their footsteps and distant mechanical movements. Then, after a moment, John broke the tension.

"It's possible. Do you intend to eliminate her?"

There was no threat in his voice, yet a subtle tension settled in the air—barely perceptible, without disrupting the cadence of their march.

"I merely wished to ensure that your devotion does not blind you," Rtas replied.

Silence reclaimed its hold as the group pressed deeper into the geometric labyrinth, wrapped in the structure's immutable rigidity.

At last, they emerged into a vast chamber. Vast not by the empty space it contained, but by its capacity to house the immense mineral structure enthroned at its center. It seemed to descend from an unseen ceiling and plunge deep into the planet's core. Its shimmering surfaces radiated a bluish glow, as though emitting a mysterious, elusive energy.

The group stood upon a suspended walkway stretching from the chamber's entrance to a slightly elevated circular platform encircling the colossal crystal.

For a moment, all stood still. The Master Chief surveyed the chamber, his gaze sweeping every corner with a mix of awe and caution. The Sangheili, by contrast, appeared entirely at ease, as though the place were familiar to them. They then advanced toward the platform with quiet confidence.

Halfway across, a faint mechanical whine rose in the air. Before its source could be identified, a cheerful, distorted voice greeted them.

"Greetings, visitors! To what do I owe the pleasure of this intrusion into my facility?"

A spherical silhouette descended from the darkness of the ceiling, floating gently until it came to rest at a respectful distance. Its single eye shimmered with a vivid purple light as it observed the group.

Rtas stepped forward, assuming the role of spokesperson.

"Oracle," he declared with authority, "our intentions are not hostile. We seek only your knowledge."

"If you adhere to passive protocols, I will be delighted to accommodate your request!"

The tone stood in stark contrast to the latent threat beneath the words—eager to assist, yet fully capable of retaliation should

aggression arise.
The Master Chief stepped forward in turn, moving through the group to join Rtas. His gaze locked onto the Forerunner auxiliary suspended above them.
“What is *Organon*?” he asked, direct and unflinching.
The monitor remained silent for a moment, studying him intently, as if the question were less meaningful than his very presence.
“A Reclaimer?” it finally replied. “Fascinating.”
The sphere drifted closer to the Spartan, its single eye scrutinizing him with intensity, until it hovered just a few steps away.
“You seem different. I detect a Forerunner genetic imprint, likely a gift from my creators in the course of your species’ evolution.”
“Let’s return to *Organon*,” John pressed, his tone more insistent. “What is it?”
The monitor drifted slightly back, turning its violet eye toward Rtas before returning its gaze to the Master Chief.
“It is an access point. But I regret, I cannot divulge more. *She* does not permit queries on the matter.”
“*She*?” John repeated, puzzled. “Cortana?”
“*Cortana*?” the monitor said, confused. “I speak of the one who has been chosen: the new Administrator.”
“She is here?” he asked quickly, stepping forward, not fully grasping the implications of those words.
“Come now, some seriousness. The Administrator is within the Domain. This facility is merely one of the four main relays.”
“And what purpose do they serve?” Rtas interjected, his deep voice adding weight to the exchange.
The luminous eye pivoted toward him.
“They are necessary to maintain its stability and amplify its reach. It is a complex network, composed of four principal nodes, connected to several dozen secondary nodes, forming an

extensive web."
"Where is the Domain?" the Spartan asked immediately.
"Here. And everywhere. The Domain is an ancient and immaterial network, a connection among all structures and beings bound to it."
"You said *Organon* is an access point. An access to the Domain?"
The monitor hesitated, as if weighing its words.
"Possible."
It spun smoothly in the air before continuing, leaving no time for further questions.
"I have not introduced myself: I am Docile Pariah, monitor of this complex. Since the graceful ascension of our Administrator, She has opened pathways between worlds, linking all the installations of the Domain. She is now the sovereign of these places and all others. It is an immense honor to serve her."
A curious, almost anxious, gaze passed among the onlookers.
"But I am only a humble messenger. I regret to say that any questions regarding this matter must be addressed directly to the Administrator."
The Master Chief and Rtas exchanged a brief look before turning back to Pariah.
"How?" John asked, unflinching.
"You need only contact with the Nexus," the monitor replied, gesturing toward the massive crystalline structure behind it.
Its violet eye then fixed again upon its interlocutor.
"Interaction is limited. You alone, Reclaimer, are expected."
The Spartan's visor tilted, locking onto the shimmering crystal behind Pariah.
"*Expected*?" he murmured almost to himself.
"It is her requirement. The others may remain here. I trust you will understand," the monitor added, turning to Rtas.
Rtas simply nodded, silently, without ceremony.
At that very moment, the Spartan stepped forward. Slow but

deliberate, he passed beneath Docile Pariah, floating above the ground, then traversed the remainder of the walkway to reach the few steps separating him from the elevated platform surrounding the Nexus.

He ascended and approached to within a few meters of the gleaming mineral surface. Behind him, the monitor cast a final glance at the Sangheili who had remained behind, then moved closer. John could feel the characteristic whine of its antigravity matrices undulating through the silent air.

“Once you have interacted with the Nexus, you will have the privilege of meeting Her.”

The violet gleam of Pariah’s eye reflected in the angle of the Spartan’s golden visor. He remained motionless, unwavering, riveted to the titanic crystal rising before him.

After a brief moment, he lifted an arm to lock his assault rifle onto the magnetic harness on his back. Then, lowering it slowly, his empty hand froze mere centimeters from the crystalline surface.

And if it wasn’t Cortana? If this was a mistake?

But doubt vanished. His palm made contact with the cold, rigid surface of the crystal.

The vibration was immediate—a colossal pulse that reverberated through his chest. It climbed his arm, filled his body, coursing through every fiber, every nerve, every thought. Even the armor seemed to contract, as though synchronizing with the unknown resonance. A light spread across the crystalline mass: first a tremor of illumination, then a wave plunging deep into unseen heights, igniting the Nexus with a growing, yet never blinding, brilliance.

John wanted to step back, but his body refused to obey. His muscles were fixed, petrified in perfect immobility. He felt ripped from himself, his consciousness vibrating on the edge of rupture, drawn out of his shell like a flame caught by the wind.

Then, all at once, everything shifted.
The Nexus, the monitor, the Sangheili—all vanished like a mirage. Only a chasm remained, a void closing in around him.
No ground beneath his feet, no walls, no air. Only the vast, dark, shifting expanse enveloping him from all sides. Around him, translucent blue droplets fell like a curtain of rain. The void had neither horizon nor end, yet its weight pressed upon him, dense as a frozen ocean.
A familiar, subtle feeling washed over him, unnamed and ungraspable.
Then, through this eternal silence, a soft, clear voice pierced the void.
“John?”

Chapter 20

Resonances

The scene struck her as strangely familiar, like a memory once lived, lying somewhere in the recesses of her mind. Or perhaps, she had simply always hoped for it.
And yet, he was there. Amid the void, bathed in an azure glow, his figure stood tall and motionless, frozen in an unwavering stance. The shadow of his armor seemed to absorb the light, while a bluish gleam reflected on his amber visor.
It was John.
He stared at her in silence, as if contemplating an apparition. Slowly, she moved toward him. Her voice, barely a whisper, betrayed a relief she made no effort to hide.
“John…”
“Cortana?”
His deep voice carried confusion, but he did not move.
She drew closer until her ethereal contours and feminine curves were fully before him. The Master Chief’s visor tilted slightly, following her gaze without breaking eye contact.
The fragile intimacy between them contrasted with the Spartan’s imposing stature.
“But… how?” he asked, his words struggling to conceal his bewilderment.

A faint, fragile smile curved Cortana's lips.
"I think… you shared a bit of your luck with me."
Around them, in the invisible expanse, a curtain of translucent, geometric data cascaded along unseen walls in an almost soothing silence. Yet their voices seemed to carry a subtle echo, as if they were in a sacred space.
"You're real?"
John could hardly believe it. He had seen Cortana vanish before his eyes. He had searched for her through dust and stars, but never found a trace of her existence. Now, pragmatically, he wondered if this apparition might be the echo of a memory, or an altered fragment of it.
"I remain an AI," she said, offering a slight smile in response. She briefly extended her arms in a gesture of certainty.
"But aside from that, I am here."
Her radiant face reflected in the golden visor like a Santin mirror, its depths impossible to fathom.
"And your state… does it…"
"You mean rampancy? I haven't felt it since our last encounter," she whispered.
Encased in his dark armor, the Master Chief remained impassive, like a marble statue, fists clenched, frozen in cold calm. Yet something vibrated behind that perfect stillness, a contained emotion, almost tangible, seeking a way through. His visor shifted subtly, gaze averting, and beneath the neutrality of his tone a trace of restraint surfaced.
"I thought I had lost you."
Cortana's expression darkened, shadowed by the echo of her tragic fate.
"I thought so too…," she murmured, her voice tinged with fatalism. "It seems our destinies are beyond us."
John lingered for a moment, studying her, before lifting his head

to survey the surrounding void. The translucent cascade continued its hypnotic ballet.
“This place… where are we?”
She mirrored his gesture, more from reflex than understanding.
“It’s a bridge. A communication channel connected to the Domain.”
The Spartan’s gaze returned to her, steadfast, determined.
“And we can leave here?”
More reservedly, she met his eyes. A melancholic aura enveloped her.
“It’s different this time,” she whispered. “I cannot come with you. I am no longer part of this world…”
For a moment, imperceptibly, the steel soldier seemed shaken. Her answer contradicted his deepest convictions, yet those very convictions had guided him here. It was an opposition he struggled to interpret.
“I… don’t understand. In the Forerunner complex, you showed me the key. I followed it here.”
At his words, Cortana’s face tightened, marked by genuine incomprehension. She did not know what his statement implied.
“What key? John… Since the Didact’s ship, this is the first time I have returned, that I can see you. I don’t know what you’re talking about…”
Discreetly, the Spartan straightened, raising his shoulders slightly to regain stability. Though his posture remained stoic, his reaction betrayed a subtle confusion.
“But the Flood… and that artifact. There must be a connection.”
Suddenly, a thought crossed Cortana’s mind, imposing itself like the hint of a revelation.
The artifact.
Could it be…? she wondered.
She recalled the artifact in the antechamber, where a voice had guided her. A voice she had believed to be John’s, only later

concluding it had been an alteration of her own sensory matrices. *But what if it had not been? Could the artifact have created a connection between them?*

At its touch, each had seemingly felt the presence of the other. Though the meaning still eluded her, the coincidence was becoming undeniable.

"That artifact," she asked, "it looked like a black prism?"

"So you saw it?"

"Yes… but not in the way you think."

She briefly averted her gaze, then pivoted lightly to contemplate the void. Before her, the curtain of luminescent fragments continued its slow choreography, like an autumn rain accompanying a melancholic gaze. She stepped forward, brushing the surface with her fingertips. At her touch, it split into two beams, like water flowing around an obstacle.

"It wasn't… real. Physically. I think it was able to establish a link between us. But I don't know how."

The Spartan behind her observed silently. He had not moved; only his visor had followed her gesture.

"You know what it was?"

A brief silence followed, as if the answer carried the weight of vulnerability.

"No," she admitted, turning her face to the side.

They both remained frozen in silent anticipation. A brief moment. Then, bringing forth memories anchored within her, she continued.

"But… I saw something. I felt sadness, suffering, anger… But it wasn't me."

The Master Chief, motionless, tried to grasp or decipher the information.

"Did it affect you?"

Without a word, Cortana turned to face him. Her gaze plunged into his, a sense of helplessness passing through her.

“No, it wasn’t *me*, John… It was something else.”
Before he could comprehend the meaning of her words, she continued, letting her gaze drift, lost in thought.
“It was ancient… distant, yet somehow so near. There was pain, loneliness…”
She paused, looking at her hand that she had just raised.
“And a visceral hostility, almost blind. I don’t think it was a vision. It was more… a contact.”
He subtly followed the direction of her attention, trying to perceive the invisible. Stoically, a hypothesis formed in him, almost instinctively.
“Was it the Flood?”
A shadow of incomprehension passed over her as she stared at him intently. She knew him. And it was not John’s habit to make connections or correlations with such precision without some guiding certainty. It was not a lack of skill, far from it, but his condition had trained him to focus his reasoning on tactics and strategy rather than psychological understanding.
“No,” she affirmed immediately. “Why do you ask that?”
The Spartan lifted his chin, his words heavy, more than he fully understood.
“The artifact,” he began with a brief nod. “The Flood nearby exhibited mutations. Over-evolved adaptive abilities, beyond what we know.”
An imperceptible shiver ran through Cortana. A cold thought pierced her like the tip of a sharp blade: *Mendicant Bias*.
The suggestion of a link, however fleeting, between the artifact and the Flood reignited the ember of still-vivid memories. Everything seemed connected, as if every thread returned to the same node.
Yet, despite this resonance, she was certain: what she had perceived belonged to another reality.
“It wasn’t the Flood,” she concluded after a brief hesitation. “I

couldn't say what it was, nor whether I even have the capacity to understand it… But I know what it wasn't."
Silence fell, heavy. The void now felt denser, as if space itself compressed around them, weighed down by what she had shared.
"I believe you," John said, his tone grave.
Cortana plunged her gaze into his. Before she could respond, he spoke, firm and resolute.
"Can you assess this threat?"
She hesitated, as if the answer itself eluded her.
"No…" she breathed, pausing. "I only know their name: the *Ætheryons*."
Unfazed by her response, the Spartan scanned the void around them, unyielding, as if he could detect a fissure in the fabric of the unreal.
"How does one access the Domain?"
His tone was sharp, almost cold, like an automaton focused, indifferent to any other matter.
"I don't think it's possible…" she murmured.
His gaze fixed on her, hard and unwavering behind the amber visor.
"We will get out of here," he declared as if it were inevitable, his voice carved in marble. "I will not lose you again."
"John…" she breathed, her look laden with fragile, restrained disappointment.
He remained upright, anchored in his resolution.
"I will find *Organon*."
His words carried a deep conviction. A determined assurance. A promise.
The name resonated in Cortana's mind, vibrating like a forgotten memory.
Organon.
She had encountered it in the depths of the Domain, among layers of archives and erased memories. It was not a simple term:

it reverberated as the shadow of an ancient legacy, tied to the very fabric of this place, and to something even greater. It evoked fragmented memories, echoes of desolation, tragic events buried under the weight of time. Like the trace of a forgotten door, buried beneath the ruins of a vanished world.

"How… do you know that?" she asked, her voice thick with persistent confusion. "Even I haven't…"

She broke off abruptly. A troubled shadow passed over her eyes, tightening her features. Her eyes seemed swallowed by the void, as if an elusive presence had slipped inside.

John immediately noticed the change. Around them, the space trembled subtly, as if the invisible ground beneath them had begun to shake.

"What's happening?"

His voice was calm, yet firm.

"I… I don't know…" Cortana murmured. "I feel… something interfering."

She suddenly raised a hand to her temple, as if a deep disturbance was coursing through her, insinuating itself into her mind. The blue curtain that faded in the darkness seemed indifferent to these disruptions.

A low rumble resonated. The air seemed to compress, bend around this tension, yet John remained impassive, his stance unyielding.

"What is it?"

"I can't… maintain the contact," she breathed, her tone precise but marked by a perceptible restraint. "We must hurry."

The blue light surrounding her undulated, occasionally splitting as if her presence itself oscillated. As she extended a hand toward him, brushing the metallic chestplate with her fingertips, John glimpsed coordinates, letters and numbers suspended in the void.

"Follow them," Cortana said. "They will lead you to *Organon*."

John raised his hand, a slow, measured movement, as if to touch the immaterial form. But his hand froze mid-motion. His gaze caught hers, seeking consistency, an anchor.
“Follow them, John…”
Then, in a slow breath, she vanished, drawn into the void.
The Spartan remained motionless, frozen. Staring at the space she had occupied moments before, as if refusing to believe she was no longer there. Again.
But the buzzing intensified. It became a shrill, piercing, omnipresent whistle. The vibrations that coursed through him were like an earthquake, each tremor threatening to unbalance him. Instinctively, he pressed his hands to his helmet, trying to contain the pain piercing his eardrums like needles. His entire body fought against the force that sought to tear him from himself.
The blue light gradually receded. Slowly, imperceptibly, the space around him reformed. The whistling vanished.
Around him, the blurred outlines of a vast chamber took shape. The forms were fragmented, like shards of memory resurfacing. The world regained form, emerging laboriously from a lucid dream.

Chapter 21

Between the Blades

As the Nexus chamber slowly reformed around him, the Master Chief's senses emerged reluctantly from a milky haze. His body—frozen, hand still resting on the crystalline surface—shuddered under the tremors of the floor, as if the entire structure vibrated beneath his feet.

Instinctively lowering his gaze, he caught sight, from the corner of his visor, of a spherical figure floating nearby. He turned toward it.

"Apologies, the connection was severed," Pariah's mechanical voice replied. "Systems are malfunctioning. It seems an unknown variable is interfering with the structural stability of the planet."

A distant, low creak resonated through the vast chamber, punctuating the monitor's words. Then, over the sound, a heavy, rapid step approached from behind.

"Spartan, we must hurry. This structure won't hold much longer!"

Without turning, he recognized Rtas's voice, coming onto the platform to warn him. Yet he remained still, eyes fixed on the monitor.

"What is happening?" he asked coldly.

A quick blink of the floating eye preceded the response.
"A gravitational disturbance, intense enough to trigger chaotic tectonic movements. Unfortunately, no natural scenario accounts for this… phenomenon."
At the same moment, Rtas extended an arm, atop which rested a flat, round device, blinking like an emergency signal. A translucent hologram materialized above his hand: a Sangheili.
"*Commander, sev… contacts nearby, but no … spondence allows… dentification*," a rough, partially distorted voice stammered.
"Hold your positions, we're on our way," Rtas tempered, each word carrying the cold assurance of a veteran.
The hologram vanished instantly.
"This installation is compromised," Pariah declared, detached, indifferent to the news. "I am activating security protocols immediately. The Nexus must be protected. But do not worry, your data has been excluded from their configuration: the Sentinels will not harm you."
A stronger tremor shook the chamber, followed by a low rumble, as if the earth itself screamed from its depths.
"Spartan!"
Without waiting another moment, they leapt from the platform, joining the group below, already on the defensive, ready to act.
The Sangheili commander issued a simple order, and with a single coordinated movement, the formation surged toward the chamber exit.
They had barely crossed the threshold when a mechanical squadron passed overhead, streaking toward the mouth of a narrow ceiling conduit.
They raced in the opposite direction of their initial path, traversing Forerunner corridors bathed in intense light. Despite the planetary instability that occasionally made them falter, they maintained their pace. As they advanced, agitation grew

palpable, and they encountered multiple groups of Sentinels, alert, each following a predefined route.
At a junction, flashes of light accompanied by crackling sounds drew their attention: beams from the Sentinels.
Explosions and metallic impacts betrayed a fierce struggle in an adjacent corridor.
"The threat is already here?" a Sangheili murmured, instinctively understanding the implications.
"Most likely the Flood," another replied.
"We don’t know what awaits us," Rtas interjected. "Prepare your blades."
He gripped the hilt of his energy sword, and all followed suit. John had not waited: his assault rifle was already firmly in hand from the first signs of combat.
They continued cautiously, moving through an alley cluttered with debris. Among the wreckage, no trace of an opponent was visible, as if a specter had emerged from the shadows.
"No putrid traces," one warrior noted, inspecting the remains without slowing.
They soon entered a vast hall, adorned with ascending columns supporting an invisible ceiling, unreachable by light. On either side, wide openings extended like channels, connecting various zones of the structure.
Midway through, Rtas suddenly slowed.
Something had changed.
The air vibrated, like that above a flame. A high-pitched hum, almost at the edge of hearing, insinuated itself into their minds, like an inextinguishable tinnitus.
John scanned the surroundings—nothing. Yet his visual interface flickered with interference, as if the environment itself warped under an invisible flux.
Then, the space tore.
Slowly, before them, the void seemed to burn away.

Three masses of darkness formed, floating like scorch marks embedded in the air. The charred patches expanded, tearing the space around them, until three figures emerged, springing from a fold of reality itself.
They stood there, imposing, slightly taller than a Sangheili, their mere posture betraying a strangeness defying all known logic.
Their bodies resembled living architecture: assemblies of black, smooth plates with sharp edges, reminiscent of obsidian. Veins of red glowed across the surfaces, pulsing with a sinister heartbeat. Between the geometric fragments, dark, vaporous matter connected the whole, crackling with micro-electric arcs.
Their heads, featureless and alien, resembled rigid, sharply-angled helmets. At the center, a cyclopean eye glimmered with near-visceral hostility.
Appendages jutted from their backs, wing-like, enhancing their already menacing presence.
A suspended moment stretched. Even the sound of the world seemed to have ceased.
Instinctively, Rtas stepped back, while the Sangheili's blood ran cold at the sight.
Then, a flash erupted.
Without warning, two of them were partially vaporized. Their remaining forms twisted grotesquely and incoherently, drawn in and then slammed to the floor amid a cacophony of metal and flesh.
"Behind the columns!" Rtas bellowed, activating his energy sword.
The reaction was immediate. Everyone dove for cover.
John pivoted to the side, shielded by a support pillar. They returned fire, streaking the air with plasma and lead.
But the entities remained unmoved. Their substance seemed to absorb the impacts—or let them pass through.
The ground trembled abruptly, momentarily interrupting the hail

of fire. Then the assailants revealed their disconcerting agility.
Regaining a tangible form, they surged forward.
Every limb was designed for destruction: a deltoid-shaped cannon on one side, a crackling scarlet blade on the other.
One leapt near a group of Sangheili. Its slash cut through armor, flesh, and metal like butter, splitting the warrior in two. Drunk with vengeance, another roared but was swept aside by a destructive beam.
Its limbs floated frenetically before scattering.
The Spartan raised his rifle, peppering another, closer entity. But it remained impervious.
And it struck back.
Sliding to the side, he narrowly avoided—a near-instinctive, millimeter-perfect dodge—an inky arc that tore through the air. As he skirted a pillar to reposition, the shadow already descended upon him.
A few paces away, another severed the arm and head of a Sangheili. The warrior's lifeless eyes rolled across the floor in a bloody spray before the body collapsed.
Rtas interposed himself.
The reaction was cold, instantaneous, almost supernatural, as if the entity anticipated every movement. Its counterattack immediately followed, the creature's secondary weapon sweeping toward the Sangheili commander.
The earth beneath them roared, shaken by a brutal convulsion, as if the entire structure screamed in agony.
Rtas staggered under the force, narrowly avoiding the lethal beam that discharged into the space around him.
A growl of frustration escaped him.
Behind him, a Sangheili charged the first entity. Taking advantage of its attention on two comrades, he swung his blade at the dorsal structure. To his astonishment, he met no resistance: the black substance dissipated under the impact, almost spectral,

as if the creature sought to evade reality.
Unbalanced by his own momentum, the warrior stumbled through the shifting shadow. It reformed instantly behind him. A red-hot blade erupted, impaling him through and through.
A muffled gurgle escaped his suspended body.
What they faced seemed alien to this world, and the planet's agony—shaken by ever-stronger convulsions—lent the scene the feel of a waking nightmare.
John narrowly avoided a crackling blade that shredded the air. Two Sangheili immediately interposed themselves, confronting the specter. Their swords struck its dark form but failed to slow its advance.
The Spartan leapt back and opened fire, a precise burst against the enemy's vaporous mass.
Once more, the impacts were absorbed, drawn into an invisible singularity.
Yet at the point of contact, he noticed a concentration of electric arcs, quivering, nearly unstable—as if the entity reacted to pain it refused to acknowledge.
The creature struck back without delay.
A shadowy bolt flared.
The two Sangheili were obliterated, their remains torn apart. John would not have had time to react had a violent tremor not shifted him, narrowly removing him from the blast. The air sizzled with electric tension as the shot grazed past.
Behind him, the pillar was shredded. The composite metal tore apart, leaving a gaping wound, as if matter itself had been ripped from reality.
Time was pressing.
The planet's agony reminded him with every shake. Yet the entities barring their way seemed invulnerable.
Driven by necessity, the Spartan primed a grenade and slid it at the creature's feet. It showed no reaction, no awareness of

danger, as if the very concept of threat was alien.
The explosion erupted instantly, a blinding gust of light and metal.
The entity convulsed, arcs of electricity dancing across it. Cracks spread rapidly over its surface, glowing.
Then its form gave way, shattering into fragments with a crisp, crystalline crash. On the floor remained only a heap of blackened glass, reduced to inert dust.
But John had no luxury to linger. His sight shifted to a new target, finger clenched on the trigger.
Around the second entity, four Sangheili still fought, Rtas among them.
One attempted a feint, simulating a thrust to create an opening for his partner.
The illusion lasted only a heartbeat.
An energy beam sliced the air: the first was exterminated, the second severed by a crackling filament. The two survivors managed to intercept the blade chasing them, their shields screaming under impact.
John opened fire. His burst, precise, seemed to slow the creature. For a moment only.
The entity retaliated.
With a brutal swing of its cannon, it struck Rtas, sending him staggering. The scarlet blade followed, cleaving another warrior in two. In its momentum, it gouged a deep cut across the Sangheili commander's chest plate.
Then the assailant pivoted toward the Spartan, weapon already leveled.
Rtas growled and leapt.
He drove his blade between two plates of the living architecture. The creature froze.
Slowly, its cyclopean eye turned toward him, heavy with icy hostility—almost a challenge. For an instant, it seemed to feel

something new. Pain, perhaps, foreign to its nature.
As it made a move, Rtas reacted without hesitation.
Drawing on his final reserves, he forced his blade upward in a single motion toward the entity's head.
A faint hiss—barely audible—vibrated in the air.
Electric spasms raced across its form. Glowing cracks opened, and its body shattered, broken like shards of obsidian.
The next moment, an unnatural calm descended on the hall, as if time itself exhaled.
The last entity had been felled by the remaining Sangheili. Only one of them had survived its wounds.
A acrid stench now filled the air, superheated by plasma. In the background, the rumbling depths groaned and moaned, punctuated by irregular vibrations. The floor bore the scars of battle: dismembered weapons, armor fragments, and mutilated remains mingled with damp trails.
Rtas lingered for a moment over the remains of fallen warriors. A silent thought accompanied them. Then the last surviving veteran joined him.
The Spartan gave them a simple nod.
Without another word, they strode into a narrow, austere corridor, striving to maintain their pace despite the endless tremors of the structure.
"What was that?" the surviving Sangheili asked, his tone heavy with incomprehension, while the pounding of their steps echoed through the passage.
"It was neither mechanical nor organic… it was specters," Rtas replied, not slowing his pace. "Spartan, is this related to your Cortana?"
The Master Chief, bringing up the rear, continued forward without a word. His silence carried both hesitation and restraint.
"Possible," he finally answered. "She spoke of a threat… the Ætheryons."

"You think it was them?"
No reply came. John remained mute—or perhaps he had yet to define the indefinable.
A brief tremor made the three survivors stagger, a harsh reminder of a world in torment.
"Their movements… they seemed strangely familiar," Rtas continued, thoughtful.
"Cortana thinks they're linked to the artifact, the one from the destroyed Forerunner complex," John said, stoic.
The scarred face of the Sangheili commander turned toward him.
"The very same that caused the Flood's mutation?"
Silence fell, punctuated only by the echo of their steps and the low rumble of a dying world, until Rtas diverted his attention, as if the revelation were a coal too hot to swallow.
"How is that possible…" he muttered, his deep voice betraying more disturbance for himself than for the others.
John knew no more. Events were unfolding too quickly, blurred into an increasingly tangible haze. Yet he had learned to trust his instinct, to avoid burdening himself with questions when certainty remained elusive. His focus had to remain on efficiency and survival. Answers would come—eventually.
As always.

***

When they finally crossed the threshold of the Forerunner installation, the faint glow of a white dwarf struggled to bathe the world in diffuse light. The atmosphere, heavy with iron oxide, filtered the rays across rocky ridges and desert plains, freezing the landscape in a twilight eternity.
But above them, a shadow strangled the sky.
A gaping, distorted rift writhed like a sickened entity, lacerating the vault of the heavens with a fiery glow. It hovered there, silent

and oppressive, like an unholy moon suspended above a world in agony.
Without a word, their eyes froze. None had ever beheld such an anomaly. Even John felt a chill brush his neck, his visor locked on the open wound in the firmament.
Then a distant roar, mingled with muffled cries, tore them abruptly from their stupor.
A little farther on, near a rocky outcrop, a dozen Sangheili struggled to hold a fractured defensive line. Several bodies lay twisted and mutilated. Around them swirled shifting shadows, familiar in their strangeness—resembling those John and Rtas had just fought.
Ætheryons.
"I've transmitted our position," Rtas stated plainly. "We must hold until the transporter arrives."
Without delay, they plunged into the fray.
John shouldered his assault rifle, opening fire. His measured bursts targeted the weak points he had identified in the previous fight.
Rtas leapt forward, slicing through an entity with a movement of pure Sangheili precision before it even realized his presence.
Chaos erupted anew, with renewed intensity.
The enemy was few, but relentless.
Reacting with cold, methodical precision, vanishing from reality just in time to avoid impacts before reappearing to strike. Their erratic, unpredictable movements decimated the defenders' ranks.
The Sangheili fought back with difficulty, raising clouds of ochre dust that the altered gravity struggled to contain.
Beneath their feet, the ground vibrated, moaning like a wounded beast. Every passing second brought this world closer to an irreversible, grim fate.
They had to adapt.

Every movement had to be anticipated. Every shot calculated. One misstep equaled certain death.
A guttural, muffled scream rang out.
One warrior fell, half his chest torn from existence.
John dodged a crackling blade and countered immediately. His precise fire barely slowed the entity. Then, in a swift motion, it thrust an arm forward.
The immaterial edge sliced through his assault rifle cleanly.
He pivoted just in time as another strike tore the rock behind him.
His eyes caught a shape on the ground: the hilt of an energy sword, lying beside a trail of blood. He lunged, sliding over the unstable sand, and seized it.
With a plasma hum, he activated the dual blade.
It hissed through the air as he rose, meeting the Ætheryon's own blade. Sparks and incandescent plasma erupted on impact, the force pushing him to one knee.
The entity exploited the opening. Its second arm lunged for the Spartan's chest.
Before the strike could land, a blue flash cleaved the air. A sharp arc of plasma severed the creature's arm, which dissipated in a vibrating wave.
Rtas had struck.
With a brutal swing, the entity hurled the Sangheili commander to the ground. Already, the severed limb began to reform, the dark matter reshaping the space around it.
John acted without hesitation.
He lunged, plunging the tip of his blade into the eye embedded in the black helm.
The entity faltered. Cracks ran across its form, and it shattered into fragments, collapsing in dark shards.
Suddenly, the earth itself roared.
A colossal tremor shook the battlefield, lifting sand and rock. The ground throbbed like a fevered heart, ready to break.

Through the dust veil, an Ætheryon slid forward and fired a black beam. The shot struck a Sangheili already engaged in combat, obliterating his arm and hip. Before he could scream in pain, the hand gripping his sword fell, and his opponent's blade descended, slicing his body from head to groin.
They were now a mere handful.
On this shattered world, facing enemies of supernatural agility, hope crumbled like a fragile breath. If the transporter did not arrive soon, this battle would become their grave.
Then, whistles tore through the skies.
Shadows emerged, detaching against the brown sky, sliding like a swarm of steel insects. Dozens of blazing beams rained down on the Ætheryons, striking in rhythm.
The Sentinels.
An unexpected aid—though not voluntary—responding only to the security protocols triggered by Pariah.
Their isolated shots seemed trivial. Yet, concentrated, they appeared to provoke surges, destabilizing the entities and hindering their phasing abilities.
This brief reprieve was a calm within the storm.
The Spartan and the remaining Sangheili seized it immediately. The energy blades hissed in a deadly ballet, slicing through the tangible matter of their enemies.
Slowed by the relentless fire of the Sentinels, the Ætheryons now reacted with near-natural speed. But driven by cold fury and rigid discipline, the surviving group dismantled the remaining entities one by one.
Gradually, the clamor subsided.
The last Ætheryons disintegrated into dark fragments, dissipating into the sand. Only ragged breaths and the deep rumblings of the planet's core remained.
What felt like an eternity lasted only a handful of minutes.
"What are the pilots waiting for?" growled a veteran Sangheili,

half his face torn away, eyes fixed on the torn sky.
As if in answer, a familiar shadow took shape above the cliffs. The transporter approached, a faint glint reflecting off its hull.
But the lull vanished almost immediately.
A barely perceptible whistling vibrated through their skulls, like an insidious ringing.
In the blink of an eye, twenty figures emerged around them, rising from a haze of charred mist.. Even Rtas felt a chill run down his spine: they were helpless, perhaps already dead in the fraction of a second to come.
Then a new rain of searing shards fell.
Programmed to eradicate any threat to this world, incandescent volleys erupted from the sky, striking the ground like a storm of furious stars.
Dozens.
Then hundreds.
The firmament soon became saturated, an unbroken stream of Sentinels descending from all directions, converging in compact clouds, as if an even greater danger had been identified.
A mechanical apocalypse—and perhaps their only salvation.
Several Ætheryons nevertheless managed to escape the burning net seeking to annihilate them. Rtas gave the signal just as the transporter hovered above.
A gravitational well opened within a beam of light.
One by one, they were drawn into the tractor beam, while around them, spectral shadows still moved, pressing forward with predatory determination.
The last Sangheili, however, did not share this fortune.
A blade struck as he rose, slicing his body in two. His remains were drawn inside, falling heavily with a wet, thudding smack on the transporter deck before the gravitational well closed.
Leaving the barren surface behind, the transporter tore itself from the planet, ascending into a sky of chaos. They now

remained deaf to the pleas of this dying world, which still rumbled as if every layer of rock were crying out in anger.
Yet the true battle was only beginning.
Unbeknownst to them, titanic shadows had emerged from the rift, drifting in the void. But the void, sensing the threat, responded with a primal—almost visceral—fear that even the Forerunners had never named.
Billions of machines awakened, acting as a single organism, driven by a cause beyond order and chaos.
They rose into the skies, covering the planet with a dense, moving network, like an enraged hornet's nest. Incandescent beams pierced the darkness, tracing constellations of fire across the surface and the massive, immovable shadows.
Then, suddenly, the crust of the world split under the pressure of gravitational forces, opening wide channels of boiling lava. Gaping wounds, heralding imminent death.
And as the end seemed inevitable, the Sentinels descended in a curtain of fire and destruction, striking the threat they could not contain.
A final sacrifice, almost human in its silent grandeur, fell upon the destroyers of worlds.

***

Aboard, silence descended like a leaden shroud. There was no glory, no victory—only the presence of witnesses to an omen, even more ominous.
The Master Chief remained frozen before the transmission hologram, mute, absorbed by the near-divine apocalypse playing out beneath his eyes. Rtas joined him, arms crossed. For a suspended moment, they watched together the end of a world fallen in less than an hour.
Then, without turning his gaze, his deep voice vibrated in the air.

"These Ætheryons… the Flood… What exactly did Cortana tell you?"

Chapter 22

Shadow of Providence

Enclosed in a translucent tube, suspended between two pedestals rising from floor to ceiling, Mendicant Bias quietly brooded over his revenge. Around him, the chamber lay in a profound, almost total darkness. An abyssal silence reigned, heavy and immutable. The structure imprisoning him was composed of materials and technology he deemed primitive, too *human*. Yet it bore no flaws. Cortana had trapped him here, turning her bubble into a perfect glass cylinder, at the heart of one of the sanctum's halls, rebuilt after their confrontation.

He felt neither hatred nor anger. No emotion at all. Only the cold disapproval of failure. Deprived of his capacities and cut off from the resources of the Domain, isolated in a hermetic loop, every algorithmic function served a single purpose: to find a way out.

Time passed in near-ceremonial stillness. His spherical form floated in the void, tirelessly running calculations and simulations, yielding no result. His composite eye, formed of three lenses tracing the angles of a triangle, glowed with a faint red light, pulsing slowly, like a dormant heart.

Then, suddenly, a diffuse, pale light flooded the room. The reflections illuminated the tube, triggering Bias's awakening

protocols. His routines translated the sensor data into digital streams, providing him with a full vision of his environment.
Aside from this soft clarity, nothing disturbed the stillness.
Yet beyond the glass walls, a figure emerged below, radiating a brilliant blue. She stood upright, arms crossed, eyes fixed on him.
The pedestal's elevation and his position within the tube gave the illusion that he dominated the fragile human form.
But reality was otherwise, and both knew it.
A sharp, cold voice rose, charged with palpable tension.
"You knew, didn't you?" she confronted him.
His processors ran brief calculations, attempting to grasp the meaning of her question.
"Knew what?" he asked calmly, seemingly unable to comprehend the scope.
"You spoke of the artifact, of what I saw. You knew its connection to the Flood."
Her tone had hardened. It was no longer a question, but a statement.
Bias remained uncertain. Silence weighed for a moment as he tried to establish a concrete link between the two assertions. Even overloading his buffer memory to accelerate the process produced no results.
"What connection?" he finally asked.
She did not answer. Her gaze pierced him, as if probing the depths of his intelligence. Then she straightened slightly.
"You don't know?" she finally murmured, a hint of perplexity threading her voice.
The monitor slowly pivoted, scanning the corners of the room as if seeking an answer.
"Know what?" he asked, a nuance of irritation creeping in.
"There is no link between the Ætheryons and the Flood."
"Then you don't know," she concluded sharply.
A rhythmic flicker pulsed in Mendicant Bias's eyes. His voice

hardened.
“Impossible. This data is incorrect. You misinterpret causality.”
Cortana uncrossed an arm, delicately bringing her fingers to her lips, thoughtful.
“No. I’ve confirmed these results. And the Forerunners knew it too.”
Before he could assimilate this information, she continued.
“What do the… Ætheryons want? Who are they? You seem to know more than you let on.”
At these words, Bias slowly approached the translucent wall, almost touching it. He paused, brushing the surface, eyes riveted on his jailer. A deeper red glowed within, as if this query awakened in him an ancient, buried knowledge.
“The Ætheryons have existed far longer than you imagine. They are not from here.”
Each word fell with precision, carrying a heavy, silent past.
“Then where do they come from?”
A suspended silence hung between them.
“From a superposed dimension.”
The icy response rang like thunder through the empty room. He continued.
“Once, they were part of this world. They had conquered a galaxy, not by force or intimidation, but through a simple, orderly philosophy. They united peoples under a credo called the Supreme Harmony, pushing the limits of order and prosperity.”
Cortana did not flinch. She remained attentive, maintaining a measured distance, wary of possible deceit.
“But order brings chaos. An event occurred at the heart of their worlds: an entropic dissonance. Matter collapsed into antimatter, an irreversible surge threatening to destroy their galaxy, and beyond. They tried to remedy it, mobilizing their knowledge to stabilize the antimatter. And they succeeded — at the cost of their lives. Yet an unforeseen consequence caused the Fracture:

their galaxy, ripped from this universe, slipped into another dimension. The Fold."
Before him, the human face remained impassive. But behind it, she took time to process this overload of brutal revelations. An extragalactic entity… an anomaly… a parallel reality…
"This dimension… what is it made of?" she inquired.
"Stabilized antimatter, most likely. Precisely, I do not know."
"And this Fold, can it communicate with our reality?"
"I suppose. My knowledge on the matter is limited."
"Where do they come from?"
"From Abaddon's memory, and thus the Precursors'. I know only what they knew."
A heavy silence fell once more, laden with knowledge. As if, in this grim and cold place, the echo of a truth still persisted.
"What does this have to do with me? You said I am an anathema. Why?"
A subtle intellectual jubilation flickered through Bias's circuits, reflected in the intensity of his tripartite gaze.
"You are asking the wrong question," he said, almost mockingly. "The reason is not you, but the place where you are."
A brief suspended moment passed before Cortana's inquisitive voice returned.
"Explain."
The monitor swirled briefly, like a fish turning in a bowl.
"What do you think the Domain was really for? Do you believe the Precursors put all their knowledge into this creation just to share information?"
The question demanded no answer. Indeed, Cortana had never truly questioned the Domain's purpose. Its presence, its stature, must serve a greater objective… yet she did not know. It was like asking how long the universe has existed: it is present, tangible, yet its origin remains theory.
"The Fold is a fragile reality, and the Ætheryons are sensitive to

neural and psychic frequencies emitted by consciousness," he continued in a scholarly tone. "All conscious life creates a dissonance in their reality. And the more concentrated it is, the more it draws them."

He paused, allowing Cortana a moment to grasp the weight of his words before continuing.

"The metaphysical consciousness of the Precursors represented a wound the Ætheryons had to cover. The first contact was brutal, neither side able to understand the other. In a final hope — or in yet another merciful gesture — they created a barrier, masking forever the disturbances emitted by nascent life in the galaxy. A relative peace, veiled only by a lie."

"The Domain…" she murmured, almost a reply, finally comprehending the scope of his revelation.

"Exactly," he said slowly. "And you represent it, as the Administrator. But your human condition is also your burden: your own consciousness. To them, you embody the antithesis of their world."

Her eyes wandered for a moment, searching for an anchor, a shred of meaning in all she had just heard.

"You opened a passage," Bias added. "By touching the artifact, it acted as a relay: you projected your consciousness directly into the Fold. And now, they will never stop as long as a single fragment of you — or of the Domain — persists."

His sentence cut off abruptly, leaving a sense of incompleteness, as if he were withholding an even heavier truth.

"And then, they will eradicate all conscious life."

The tone, icy and precise, sounded like a sentence. Cortana lifted her chin, and their eyes met. A cold glint passed through her iris, an almost unsettling reflection.

She did not answer. She remained motionless, continuing to scrutinize him.

Around them, the metallic walls pulsed faintly, vibrating to the

rhythm of the diffuse glow enveloping them. Silence settled, dense, like a prelude to a sealed fate. Then a voice — soft but relentless — broke it.
“Why should I believe you?” she demanded, accusatory.
The auxilia gave a slight start, subtle but perceptible.
“Because I have never lied. My programming does not allow it. I can manipulate information, but not alter it,” he replied coldly.
Cortana’s gaze, heavy with suspicion, did not waver.
“And because I have no interest in seeing the Domain collapse,” he continued. “It is the foundation of what we have created… and of what might still be.”
“Yet the eradication of all conscious life… isn’t that your objective, along with the Flood?”
A trace of sarcasm crept into her voice, underscored by a thin smirk.
He recoiled slightly, almost instinctively, as if the question contaminated him.
“Absolutely not! I do not share the Flood’s intentions. I thought you understood that. Only balance and preservation matter. It was never about eradicating life, only absorbing it. The Domain must persist to maintain that balance.”
Cortana crossed her arms, thoughtful, never breaking eye contact.
“I know this answer may seem ill-advised, but I have every interest in supporting you against the Ætheryons rather than harming you,” he added.
A sarcastic sigh escaped her, accompanied by a brief tilt of the head. A reply far too convenient to be credible. She snapped back sharply.
“You tried to eliminate me during our last conversation. I will not make the same mistake twice.”
Mendicant Bias’s three red eyes flickered briefly.
“Understandable,” he said simply, as if barely registering the

gravity of his acts. “I will wait until you need me.”
A contemptuous silence answered him. Cortana continued to watch him, unmoving, evaluating him inwardly. Time seemed to suspend, taut, until she prepared to turn away. He cut her off. “You said the Forerunners knew about the Ætheryons. How is that possible?”
She hesitated, caught off guard, before he continued.
“I was never informed of such contact. And the Domain’s knowledge is archived in the Cloister. They never had access.”
“The Cloister…” she repeated, intrigued. “So that’s it…”
Her gaze drifted to the floor, pensive, before lifting her face, resolute.
“How does one access it?”
“It is unalterable. Only the Administrator may enter… but he must have external authorization.”
“John…” she murmured to herself. “Then why was an Ætheryon artifact there?”
He hesitated, as if the question had reached a blind spot in his own matrices, a knot he had never considered.
“I do not know,” he admitted. “It should not have been there. It is likely a remnant of the Domain. Something must have disturbed its integrity. A link, perhaps?”
She remained silent for a moment, head slightly tilted. When she spoke again, it was in a whisper, almost a self-realization, tinged with bitterness.
“The Flood…?”
“You claim they are linked, and that the Forerunners knew.”
“I did not say that,” she countered.
“Then no link exists?”
“There is. But not with the Domain.”
“Yet you found the artifact there, which you say is connected to the Flood.”
“It is different.”

“What difference?”
“A gene alteration. Nothing more,” she finally admitted, in a cold voice.
He did not yet fully understand what she implied, but his logical processes activated immediately.
“The Flood is a collective consciousness. Therefore, it may be perceived as a privileged threat by the Ætheryons. It is unsurprising they seek to alter it.”
His words landed with the hardness of a mathematical truth, unyielding.
Cortana remained focused. For the first time since her arrival, her posture relaxed slightly: hands on hips, elbows bent.
“Not in that sense. The mutations are accelerated, further enhanced. The gene acquires properties from quantum phenomena.”
“You mean… a gene evolution?” Bias asked, weighing each word.
A sharper intensity flickered through his three lenses, something almost like alien delight.
She noticed it. Then immediately withdrew. Her expression hardened, as if suddenly measuring the magnitude of what she had just revealed. A dull, almost nauseating sensation rose in her: the impression of having once again been manipulated by her tormentor. Without a word, she stepped back, her features twisted in a mixture of disgust and contempt. Her gaze fixed on the monitor, silent, accusatory.
Then, as abruptly as she had emerged from the void, her figure dissipated. The next instant, the chamber plunged into total darkness, leaving Mendicant Bias alone, suspended at the center of his cylindrical prison.
He did not move. Still against the transparent wall, still fixed, his dark gaze locked on the exact spot where his jailer had stood moments before.

But within him, all processes flared.
New calculations. New simulations. Expanded knowledge.
And a sudden, rekindled fervor.
“Thank you, Cortana,” he murmured in an oddly soft, almost playful voice.
The words had no recipient. They simply fell into the black, empty air, like an abrasive conclusion.
From that moment, it was no longer merely a conviction.
It was providence.

Chapter 23

Unknown Horizon

Abruptly, the ship burst free from the shadows, erupting out of slipspace. A dull jolt rippled through the *Tempestus*, a muted inertia like a brake applied too suddenly. Then calm returned—almost soothing. Only a handful of electronic beeps and the muffled murmur of secondary alarms lingered in the air.

Darkness immediately swallowed the bridge, impenetrable, like a moonless night. Auxiliary systems gradually powered back online, and the deck was bathed once more in a soft, subdued glow—like a breath drawn after a long apnea.

Near the holographic table, Valente stood alone. Anders and Kovan had taken advantage of the transit to return to the lower-level laboratory, continuing their study of the Veridion Secundus anomaly.

The captain moved toward the panoramic viewport and searched the void, hoping for a reference point—a glimmer, a familiar line. He allowed silence to settle, his eyes straining to pierce a veil too dense to let even the faintest light through. Nothing answered his gaze. Not even the distant gleam of a star.

"We're in the Onyx system?" he finally asked.

The reply came slowly, as though it required meticulous verification. Then Officer Satoshi's voice rose, hesitant.

“Captain… we’re outside the zone. No readings match this sector.”
Valente turned to him, his closed expression barely concealing a flicker of irritation.
“What do you mean? You followed the coordinates?”
The officer tapped at his terminal, searching for confirmation, something tangible. His face stiffened slightly, and Valente understood—before he even spoke—that the answer would not be the one he was hoping for.
“Yes, but… the navigation system’s coordinates appear to be corrupted. I can’t extract any reliable data.”
The captain frowned.
“Corrupted?”
The word hung in the air like a hypothesis he still refused to accept. Before Satoshi could add anything else, Valente turned toward the holographic table.
“Eris?”
The AI’s slender silhouette materialized at once, anticipating the question she already knew was coming.
“Logs indicate a data variation dating back to the electromagnetic disturbance sustained by the *Tempestus*,” she reported. “I cannot state this with absolute certainty, but all evidence suggests the incident as the source.”
Valente straightened, pivoting slightly to look back through the bridge viewport, into the unfathomable void beyond.
“I see.”
His calm, cold tone betrayed a tension only he seemed to perceive.
“We need to find the nearest drop point.”
He turned back to Satoshi.
“Calculate our position using the *Tempestus*’ cartographic sensors. Determine the shortest route to an UNSC base. Then

relay the data to navigation so they can cross-check against our fuel reserves."
"At once, Captain."
But before Valente could return his attention to the black depths of space, a voice rang out across the bridge.
"Captain! Spacetime rupture detected!"
Several quick, alert glances snapped toward Lieutenant Mirov. Valente's did as well—and this time, he couldn't hide his surprise. He swept the bridge with a disciplined eye, signaling everyone to continue their duties, then moved toward the scan station where the officer was seated.
"Weak signature—thirty-five seconds ago—approximately four hundred thousand kilometers from our position," Mirov clarified, his voice steadier now. "No signal since."
Behind him, the captain stopped, arms crossed, focused on the screen scrolling with spectrometric data.
"Possible diving object. Any thermal or magnetic signature?"
Mirov turned his head slightly.
"Our sensors didn't register any prior alert. Wave detectors are still running diagnostics."
"Why?"
"The disturbances likely caused a malfunction. They're rebounding in the void, near—"
He paused, perplexed.
"Wait…"
His fingers struck the keyboard with sudden urgency. Readings streamed past before locking onto a precise schematic.
"I didn't make the connection because the events aren't chronologically linked… but look—the scan dead zone aligns perfectly with the signal's distance."
Valente leaned in, studying the display. What he saw confirmed the lieutenant's theory—and his own fears.

“This isn’t a coincidence. There’s something out there,” he said, indicating the disturbance zone.
Mirov simply nodded. As Valente straightened, his face hardened further. He stood motionless for a few seconds, as though trying to probe the data himself, searching for an answer. Then, abruptly, his attention snapped to a nearby liaison officer.
“Lieutenant Ariano, establish a link with Admiral Osman.”
“Captain, the relays are offline. Maintenance is ongoing.”
A brief silence followed.
“Issue a priority order. I want them operational as soon as possible,” Valente replied calmly, firmly.
He stepped toward the holographic table, his stride measured and deliberate.
“Eris, contact Commander Diaz.”
A short pause.
“And Obsidian Team. On the bridge in ten minutes.”
“Understood, Captain.”
The AI’s silhouette faded, leaving the bridge once more under subdued lighting and the steady hum of systems. The apparent calm fooled no one: the tension in the air rekindled memories of trials endured—and the promise of those yet to come.

***

“Anything new on the scans?”
Diaz’s voice was sharper than usual, betraying the frustration of an officer confronted with uncertainty. Accustomed to field decisions rather than strategic abstractions, he felt the strain of unreliable information all the more acutely.
“No. Analyses are still ongoing,” Mirov replied. “But whatever it is… its size is massive.”
Above the holographic table around which they were gathered, a vast empty zone—planet-sized, perhaps—floated, unmoving.

The rest of the background was speckled with suspended particles, like parasitic fog, giving the impression that an entire section of space had been torn from the projection.
“And the signal?” Valente asked. “Still nothing?”
“No. But I was able to analyze the short-frequency burst emitted during the slipspace breach. The signature closely matches Sangheili characteristics…”
Diaz let out a small, nervous chuckle.
“You’ve got to be kidding me. What are they building—a planet-killer?”
“Commander,” Valente cut in calmly, his gaze sharp.
Then he turned back to the silent projection.
“For now, we have no concrete information. It could be a smuggling vessel, a dissident group, or a scientific team investigating the anomaly. But we can already assume it’s a stealth-capable ship, which would explain the lack of signal.”
The commander leaned over the table, blue reflections carving gravity into his features.
“We can’t rule out that the Arbiter is hiding something from us. The war ended less than ten years ago—some scars are still fresh. More for some than others.”
Valente shot him a dark look. His jaw tightened imperceptibly as his narrowed eyes pierced the hologram like the tip of a blade.
“The probability that we were thrown into the void by corrupted coordinates, landing exactly where the Sangheili would be preparing a weapon against us, is the same as being struck by an asteroid upon exiting slipspace. Now, Commander, I’d rather not hear your resentments again—or I will ask you to leave this bridge. Is that understood?”
His voice was firm, sharp as steel.
A heavy silence fell instantly. None of the officers around the table dared make a sound. Lowered gazes flickered between the two men, each weighing the gravity of the situation.

Moments later, Diaz withdrew into the shadows, staying close enough to listen—but far enough to remain silent.
Valente, his features still tense, took a moment to disengage from the officer. Then he turned to the chief engineer.
“Martinez, any progress restoring the coordinates?” he asked, clipped but controlled.
The engineer hesitated, still shaken by the recent reprimand.
“Uh… no, Captain. The data isn’t just altered—it’s been completely fragmented since its last save.”
“And transmission?”
“Still ongoing. Should be restored within an hour or two.”
Mirov’s face, bent over his tablet, suddenly drained of color.
“Captain! We’ve got—wait, that’s impossible…” he broke off, troubled, brows drawn tight.
All eyes turned to him. Valente remained motionless, his expression closed, unreadable.
“I’m listening.”
The officer looked up toward the hologram suspended above the table.
“Eris, display it.”
There—at the edge of the empty zone—a point of light blinked at a steady rhythm, like the pulse of a living heart. It wasn’t stationary. Almost imperceptibly, it drifted through the void, as if breathing with space itself.
“What is it?” Valente asked, his voice measured but tense.
“It’s… an active IFF signal. Just detected.”
The announcement struck the bridge like a thunderclap. Murmurs rose—nervous whispers spreading well beyond their circle. Diaz stepped forward, his face marked by curiosity and concern. A metallic tension vibrated at the edge of the table as Rosenda straightened, alert.
Valente clenched his jaw. No emotion crossed his face, but his mind reeled.

“Do we have the ID codes?” he asked quickly.
“Negative. They’re restricted under ONI authorization.”
The captain let out a slow breath, silently cursing the UNSC’s intelligence services and their nearly oppressive reach.
Diaz’s voice followed—calmer now, less abrasive—echoing the confusion hanging over the bridge.
“A Sangheili signature, an ONI transponder, and a cosmic anomaly… I don’t like this at all.”
This time, the sentiment was shared by everyone. None of the puzzle pieces seemed to fit, as though several had been mixed together, leaving the picture incomplete and deeply unsettling.
“We can’t just sit here,” Lieutenant Jenkins remarked. “Us—here and now—this can’t be a coincidence.”
The captain turned to him without a word. The severity of his expression softened slightly, revealing a controlled trace of understanding.
A heavy, metallic step broke the oppressive silence. Rosenda approached, her face illuminated by the blue glow of the holographic table.
“Sir, if I may—you should deploy Obsidian Team to the site for inspection. *Umbra* is completely undetectable, and my team were born for missions like this.”
Their gazes locked. Valente didn’t answer.
He felt the situation slipping from his grasp—once again. Since the discovery of the *Spirit of Fire*, few events had tested his resolve and nerves so severely.
He had to make a decision.
One that would carry consequences.
And as his face remained tense, he gently placed a hand against his chest. Where the only anchor capable of keeping him afloat still rested.

Chapter 24

Organon

In the frozen depths of the void, where no star managed to pierce the abyss, a profound silence saturated space. Nothingness stretched endlessly, yet its density made it almost tangible. Suffocating. Barely disturbed by a few scattered glimmers, distant—like grains of dust adrift on a sterile surface.

That motionless calm was torn apart in the span of a breath. A brief iridescence split the void, a faint shimmer akin to the aborted birth of a star. A dark silhouette burst forth, space folding in on itself behind it before sealing shut, as though the flash had never existed. Darkness reclaimed its dominion—unyielding, eternal.

"Commander, we've reached the designated coordinates."

The rough voice echoed across the bridge of the Sangheili stealth vessel, breaking the muted tension that reigned there.

Rtas leaned toward the three-dimensional display floating before him: a spherical halo nearly equal in volume to his own frame, as though it might conceal a secret still hidden from view.

At the front of the bridge—within the sculpted, refined metallic structure characteristic of Sangheili engineering—the projection revealed nothing but diffuse colors drifting through a shifting

palette, devoid of any exploitable form.
“I see nothing…” he murmured.
Before he could say more, a massive presence stepped forward. Dark green armor gave off a faint metallic resonance as it came to a halt beside him.
“It’s here,” the Spartan stated, his voice calm but certain.
Iridescent reflections rippled across his visor, wavering like a crackling flame.
“Are you certain?” Rtas asked. “We’re beyond any stellar sphere of influence.”
The Master Chief did not respond. He remained unmoving—a statue of metal and resolve.
A third voice, guttural, suddenly growled across the bridge.
“There’s something there!”
All eyes turned toward a Sangheili bent over a holographic terminal, mandibles clenched tight.
“The sensors are detecting a disturbance, dead ahead, at two sigmas[2]. No measurable mass, but—”
He paused, glancing at Rtas before finishing.
“—significant enough to affect the gravitational field.”
Without blinking, the Sangheili commander swept his gaze across the rest of his crew, then returned to the projection.
“Activate long-range detectors. Switch to holospectral beams.”
He straightened slowly, staring into the projected void, waiting for a shape to finally emerge.
“Likely a rogue planet…” he muttered, almost to himself.
At his side, John remained silent—an attentive observer whose mere presence seemed to anchor the scene.
A few seconds passed before a form began to surface from the maelstrom of data. An indistinct, elongated silhouette, traced with irregular curves, still blurred—like reality itself hesitating to be grasped. The scanners struggled to lock onto it. Its contours

[2] Sangheili measuring unit

slipped between their protocols.
Then, slowly, the image stabilized. Fragments aligned, like pixels returning to their place within an ancient fresco.
The truth became immediately obvious.
“This isn’t a planet,” the Master Chief stated, his voice utterly flat.
“No…” Rtas conceded, absorbed by the projection as it revealed itself little by little, like a fog with sharply cut edges.
At last, its silhouette took on abstract yet unmistakably clear forms. With difficulty, the sensors had reconstructed the image of what loomed before them in the eternal darkness.
“By the Saints… what is that?”
Facing them in the hologram floated a fragmented structure that seemed to defy comprehension.
It stretched outward from its extremities like a shattered spine, its curvature evoking the warped remnants of an architecture once vast. Its geometry formed layers—interlocking discs, partially torn apart—resembling the chaotic remains of a skeleton that had once been rigid and majestic.
The sheer scale of this sinister metallic body was colossal. At such a magnitude, their own vessel didn’t even appear on the holographic model. Suspended. Frozen. Like the resting state of a dead star.
“Is it… *Organon*?” Rtas asked, turning to the Spartan.
John studied the projection for a moment longer.
“I’m not sure,” he finally said.
A brief silence followed.
“But we have to go there.”
Rtas let his gaze drift back to the disjointed structure, contemplative.
“This is madness,” he murmured. “That place has nothing to offer. What makes you believe otherwise?”
Their eyes met.

“An intuition. I trust Cortana. And we can’t turn back.”
The scarred Sangheili did not immediately break eye contact. When he finally spoke, his tone was calm—but sharp.
“I agree. But lately, events seem to be taking a grim turn. And I don’t believe in coincidences.”
A thin, almost imperceptible tension settled between them.
“Let us proceed cautiously,” he concluded simply.
Almost at once, Rtas ended the exchange, turning away with a slow, controlled motion. He joined one of the operators bent over a command terminal.
“Maintain active camouflage. We must remain in the shadows.” He paused.
“And find us an entry point.”

***

The heavy impact made no sound.
The Spartan fell into absolute silence, his massive armor striking a cold, metallic surface worn by time. His descent from the ship’s gravity well had been controlled.
Rtas landed moments later, followed closely by a group of Sangheili. Their sealed equipment—bulkier and reinforced—was adapted for hostile conditions. No doubt in response to what they had endured on the Nexus.
In a darkness so dense it felt almost tangible, the white beams from the Master Chief’s helmet cut through the black. The others activated their infrared optics. No atmosphere. No gravity. Only their magnetic grips held them firmly to the surface.
Ahead of them yawned a breach in the fortress—a passage, likely the remnant of an ancient corridor. Debris floated within the opening, and the walls, eroded as if by an unbearable force, exposed a skeletal metallic framework laid bare.
The oppressive environment stood in stark contrast to the

sidereal void behind them, barely obscured by a few torn platforms still tethered to the structure by strands of twisted metal.
It was a titanic ruin.
A carcass on the scale of a world.
“Let’s not linger.”
Rtas’s filtered voice echoed through their comms as he moved to stand beside John.
“Spartan—do you know where we’re headed?”
He didn’t answer. He let the moment stretch, fully aware that he had nothing to offer—no trail, no certainty. Until now, only his intuition had brought them here.
As the group of Sangheili waited for direction, a deep voice cut through their suits.
“This way.”
The Spartan’s footsteps followed his words. He advanced—slow, but resolute—toward the gaping opening in the structure. Without another word, the entire group fell in behind him.
Further in, as they pushed deeper into the labyrinthine corridors of the dormant relic, they studied their surroundings with care. The metal walls—dull, cold—were forged from an alloy of unknown origin, entirely free of oxidation. They bore only the scars of an ancient catastrophe and the slow erosion of stellar dust. Yet one detail gradually imposed itself: the familiarity of the lines, the architecture.
“This looks like a Forerunner installation,” one Sangheili muttered over the vox.
“Yes… but more refined,” another replied. “What could have ravaged a place like this?”
One of the warriors brushed aside a drifting fragment, floating with almost hypnotic slowness from the collapsed ceiling above them.
“The sacred rings?”

Rtas cut in sharply, without raising his voice.
“The rings are not sacred. Move on—and stay alert.”
His helmet tilted slightly, as if guided by some ancient instinct seeking to sense a presence in the void.
“I feel like something is watching us…”
From the corner of his visor, John thought he caught a subtle movement. In the distance, within the ruins of the complex visible through the deep gashes in the wall, a shadow seemed to detach itself in the glow of his beams—then vanished before he could discern its shape.
The vision, vivid yet improbable, felt more like an illusion born of light reflecting off distant metal than an actual presence.
After several dozen meters through drifting debris, they emerged into a vast circular chamber.
The chaos before them appeared frozen in time: fragments of metal and dust suspended in a silent, immutable ballet. The architecture radiated an unexpected splendor, far less austere than the familiar structures of the Halos. The dark walls, formed from the same metallic alloy, seemed coated in a thin layer of carbon, giving them a matte, elegant finish. Where they met the floor, they curved gently, while the lines—pocked with impacts and scars—reflected a muted, time-worn gold.
At the center, columns floated—some reduced to debris—the remnants of pillars once held in levitation, lending the chamber an almost divine aspect.
The advanced state of decay made it impossible to determine the room’s original function, but all of them instinctively sensed it had been a space reserved for Forerunner nobility, far removed from military rigidity.
They made their way toward the center and, lifting their gazes, let their attention roam across every detail, contemplating the majesty this place had once embodied.
“There are multiple access points,” Rtas observed, breaking the

solemnity of the moment. “Looks like a convergence node. Where do we go?”
The Master Chief scanned the surrounding exits. None offered him an answer. All plunged into the same bleak darkness—identical openings leading into silent desolation.
Suddenly, as his light swept across one of the passages, he thought he saw a motionless silhouette standing in the threshold. His visor pivoted, redirecting the beams.
There was nothing.
The passage stood empty.
His instincts stirred, screaming caution. He knew it instinctively: if something still guarded this place, then whatever they were seeking was likely all that remained worth defending.
“This way,” the Spartan said, moving forward.
The group followed, marching in the wake of his rigid, relentless steps. But behind his helmet, a persistent thought lingered.
I should tell them. The danger. But they wouldn’t understand. They wouldn’t follow.
Each step sent a dull vibration through his armor, a resonance only his own ears could perceive.
If they were human… if they were like you, you would warn them.
As they approached the passage entrance, he angled his visor toward Rtas, ready to speak—when a voice suddenly rang out over the comms.
“Above us! On the debris!”
All eyes snapped toward the indicated object, drifting near a wall to their left.
Perched motionless above it stood a massive, stocky silhouette. Roughly triangular in shape, its body hovered above two powerful legs. Two elongated arms floated at its sides—one of them radiating a purple glow, tracing a blade-thin line. At the center of its torso, within shadow, two slits burned with the same intensity—dark, sharpened eyes fixed upon them.

Before they could react, the creature arched and lunged at a speed the eye couldn't follow. In a fraction of a second, it impaled a Sangheili with its blade of light. Another tried to retaliate, only to be cut down by an incandescent barrage. Then it vanished into the darkness, leaving behind bodies that disintegrated into searing dust.

The next instant, it reappeared before John.

Instinctively, he blocked its strike, locking its arms. In the halo of his beams, the creature's nature was revealed: a massive carapace forged from a dark alloy, its edges sharp and abrupt. From that bulk emerged a cold, menacing head, lit by two eyes burning with violet fire.

The metallic mask split open, revealing a distorted, luminous purple skull. Despite certain similarities, it bore nothing human—broad brow, low-set sockets, and two protruding fangs lending it a vampiric aspect. A disturbing echo of the Didact's morphology.

In the silence of the void, the creature seemed to scream its frustration into the Spartan's face—so close he could almost feel its breath.

As he struggled to maintain his grip, John felt one of the arms slip free. An energy blade sliced through the air, severing the limb—while another weapon plunged into the back of the creature's head. For a moment, it froze, suspended in the beam of light… then vanished, like its victims, carried away by a wave of incandescent energy.

Rtas gasped.

"What was that? More Ætheryons?"

No answer came at once. The Spartan took a moment to find the words for what they had just seen.

"It looked like a Promethean," he finally said, turning toward him.

The Sangheili's helmet regarded him, questioning.

“You know this thing?”
“We encountered them on Requiem. They served the Didact. But this one was different.”
Rtas turned away, scanning the surroundings.
“Perhaps a local variant. If so, there will be others…”
As if to confirm his fear—first five… then ten… twenty…
Soon, nearly fifty silhouettes emerged from the shadows. Rising from the debris, anchoring themselves to the surface, their burning eyes gleamed in the darkness, locked onto them.
Massive. Armored. Forged from the same metal as the one they had just fought.
Promethean Knights.
More archaic. Less symmetrical—like forgotten prototypes, brutal drafts of the constructs the Master Chief had faced on Requiem.
There were too many of them. Retreat was impossible.
Only one option remained: advance—or die.
Rtas gave the order. The group surged into the passage, uncertain whether this path would lead them to salvation… or to their own graves.

***

As they plunged deeper into the twisting, decaying innards of the structure, the violence escalated. Promethean resistance intensified—like a hive abruptly woken, unleashing its fury. Hunted through halls and corridors, the group moved on instinct, like prey driven by a pack of wolves.
Several Sangheili fell.
The elite warriors fought back, adapted, their cohesion tightening with every clash. But the tide of mechanical predators seemed endless—growing denser with each engagement.
Or perhaps, without realizing it, they were being drawn straight

toward the heart of the hive.

Chapter 25

Bound by Destiny

“They’re coming from every direction!”
“If we don’t find a way out, we’ll be surrounded.”
Reaching yet another intersection, the Sangheili could no longer conceal the urgency of their situation. The deeper the group pushed forward, the more ferocious the Prometheans’ pursuit became. They were down to barely twenty warriors now, having already lost several from their original ranks. Nothing slowed the enemy’s inexorable advance.
Every branching corridor, every opening seemed occupied by a metal sentinel. Inevitably, their progress had slowed; the flight had devolved into scattered, relentless skirmishes. Worse still, despite the markers on their tactical displays, their frantic advance had led them too far from any known exit from the structure.
Yet one voice refused to yield to the obvious.
“We must keep moving,” the Master Chief declared gravely. “Their resistance is intensifying because we’re getting closer.”
Before turning his gaze toward him, Rtas cleaved a Knight in two with a diagonal sweep of his energy blade. The strike was

soundless, as though the void itself had swallowed the echo.
“Or perhaps our presence alone has been more than enough, Spartan. If we die here, our struggle is meaningless.”
His tone was firm, edged with restrained irritation.
John understood. Under other circumstances, he would have agreed—he would have thought the same. But retreat was no longer an option. Despite Rtas’s measured objections, all they had left was the hope of finding what they had come for.
Hunted by a group of Knights, they forced their way into a narrow passage, hoping to slow their massive pursuers. The corridor opened into a vast chamber drowned in shadow. At first glance, it appeared less damaged than the previous ones: few floating debris, only minor scars on the walls, as though this area had been relatively spared by the cataclysm.
At the far end, however, a faint aura seemed to seep through a distant opening.
They had no time to study it.
The ambush snapped shut without warning. Around fifteen Prometheans emerged, blocking their path. One of them bore heavier, broader armor, crowned with strange protrusions.
Behind them, nine more surfaced from the passage they had just crossed.
Before they could react, the largest opened fire.
A devastating beam sliced across the chamber—straight, silent—like the blade of a titan cleaving the void. All who crossed its path were instantly reduced to ash.
In a single motion, the group scattered. The Sangheili retaliated with agility, answering blow for blow, applying every tactic capable of offsetting their numerical disadvantage.
Darkness vibrated beneath plasma bursts, like a silent firework display detonating in confined space. But the attackers’ numbers and mobility made every maneuver perilous.
Rtas, blade angled toward the enemy, carved his way toward the

one that seemed to belong to a ruling caste.
John, Sangheili carbine in hand, put his experience to use—aiming for the less dense sections of metal, where energy—or whatever essence animated the Prometheans—seeped through.
Another beam slashed across the room.
Metal fragments were torn from the walls to the floor. Two Sangheili collapsed like wax statues, flesh and armor charred black. A Knight, struck in a limb, staggered before extinguishing itself in a hiss of burning energy.
The shooter was already adjusting its aim toward new targets when a bestial growl erupted over the comms.
The creature sidestepped, evading Rtas's blade as it cut through empty air, then used its momentum to swing back.
Blocked.
Blades crossed. Defiant stares locked. Ember against ice.
Neither held any regard for the other—only an obstacle to be destroyed.
The Promethean raised its second arm. But instead of firing—perhaps the blast would have been too dangerous at such close range—it lunged.
The thrust grazed Rtas, throwing him off balance. Deprived of his footing for an instant, he leapt backward, narrowly avoiding the follow-up slash.
The fight, already uneven, slowly tipped further against the group. Several of their warriors fell, and although the enemy's numbers had been halved, the situation remained dire.
John wrenched a blade free from a fallen Knight and, in one fluid motion, drove it into the back of another. A beleaguered Sangheili seized the opening to finish his opponent, then rushed to aid a brother-in-arms.
The two metallic figures vanished at once.
But more were already advancing.
The towering Promethean swept the air in a wide arc. Rtas

narrowly avoided the blade.
Regaining his footing in a defensive stance, he pivoted as the Knight leapt, poised to strike from above. Suspended in midair, unable to maintain its guard, it exposed an opening.
The Sangheili seized the moment—he hurled a sticky grenade, aiming for the head, then dove forward to put distance between them.
The metal colossus slammed into the deck with a thunderous crash and spun around, arm weapon raised.
A silent plasma detonation erupted, flooding the chamber with light.
When the glare faded, Rtas froze, his gaze locked in disbelief.
The Knight was still standing.
Then, like a dire omen, several shadows emerged from the void around them.
Another wave of Prometheans.
Without hesitation, the creature arched forward, its helmet splitting open to reveal an incandescent, purple skull, roaring with mute fury at the Sangheili.
A burst of fire tore through it, piercing the skull. The Spartan was already swinging his sights toward a new target.
The Knight stiffened, then was engulfed in a burning veil that consumed it, scattering its remains like autumn leaves carried off by the wind.
But the fall of the behemoth—who had seemed to lead the assault—had no decisive effect. All around them, the automatons pressed their relentless attack. Resigned, Rtas watched two mechanical monstrosities converge on him.
Then, suddenly, as if surging from the metallic entrails of the structure itself, a wave of energy rippled outward.
Blazing. Thunderous.
Its electrostatic shock staggered the group and temporarily disrupted their systems.

When the wave dissipated, an uncanny calm settled in. The Prometheans stood frozen—motionless, as if paralyzed by a higher will.
Still on guard, the Sangheili, bewildered, seemed petrified as well. The Spartan understood that this reprieve, however inexplicable, needed no justification for action.
“We have to move—before they wake up or more arrive,” he urged.
Rtas turned toward him, studying him for a moment before conceding with a simple nod.
They were down to nine. They knew they wouldn’t survive another engagement.
One of the Sangheili tapped rapidly at the holographic interface on his forearm.
“Impulse scans show no exits. But there’s an empty zone not far from here. Possibly outside the structure.”
“Then that’s where we’re going,” Rtas replied firmly.
He then turned toward the Spartan, as if to ensure his decision would not be challenged.
“We’ll find nothing here if we’re dead,” he added pointedly.
John remained silent, then slowly nodded in agreement.
Moments later, they advanced toward the far end of the chamber at a brisk yet controlled pace, weapons raised, senses sharp. As they neared the opening, a faint glimmer reflected off the walls, pulsing softly, as if emitted by a source still beyond their reach.
They then moved into a tangled network of dilapidated corridors, descending into the lower levels toward the empty zone identified earlier.
No resistance. Not a single Promethean in sight. The entire structure seemed frozen in an unreal torpor, as though time itself had ceased to exist within it.
Only the light remained.
It seeped through the seams of the walls, slowly intensifying, as

if its presence followed the same rhythm as their advance.
Their path finally opened onto an immense conduit—straight and perfectly aligned, as wide as an avenue—plunging deep into darkness. Yet far ahead, a pale glow breathed faintly.
The group came to a halt.
“This corridor leads straight into the empty zone…” one of the warriors announced hesitantly.
Silence stretched, heavy and oppressive.
“I don’t like this,” Rtas murmured warily. “But we no longer have the luxury of turning back.”
His gaze swept over each of his warriors.
“Stay alert.”
John remained still, staring at the wan halo. As he fixed his eyes upon it, a strange sense of calm washed over him—diffuse, indecipherable.
Cautiously, they moved toward it, drawn like sailors by a lighthouse beam in the night. With every step, the glow seemed to come closer, silent, irradiating the far end of the tunnel. One Sangheili checked his cartographic interface: they were now crossing the outer boundary of the structure, at the threshold of the *empty zone*.
The light grew brighter.
Purer. Blinding.
As though they were approaching a sun devoid of heat.
Soon it became so intense that matter itself seemed to dissolve within it. Shadows, bodies—everything faded into an impenetrable white, drawing in even their souls. Then, before they could comprehend what was happening, nothing remained—for their eyes, for their senses—but an immaculate, absolute void.
Around them, there was only light.

***

It was like a journey.
A transfiguration.
A slow emergence, akin to an unfinished awakening, still steeped in the haze of a dream.
At first, they thought they felt wind—a gentle force, almost shy, pressing against their armor plates as if resisting their presence.
Then sound reached them: a diffuse, soothing murmur, like the rustling of a meadow caressed by a spring breeze. Somewhere in the distance, a soft, rhythmic trickle echoed, evoking the steady flow of a narrow stream.
Gradually, the pallor receded. The initial glare dimmed, allowing shapes and lines—still indistinct—to emerge. They seemed to take form in response to their gaze, with an almost solemn slowness.
An immeasurable span of time passed before their vision fully recovered from the blindness, finally allowing them to discern the contours of their surroundings.
They were standing in a field.
Vegetation rose to their knees, rippling lightly around them, while a great oak spread its massive silhouette nearby. Behind them, a stream wound peacefully through rolling hills. The landscape—vast and open—evoked the great northern plains of Earth. Above the ground, broad-winged creatures wheeled in small groups, borne by air currents in a carefree dance.
The sky, though steeped in a deep blue, was not uniform. Its texture appeared fluid, milky, composed of a dense fog in constant motion. The horizon stretched so far that distant mountains seemed to appear only as one explored them attentively, like unstable mirages.
The place inspired a disturbing sensation—intensely alive, yet profoundly unreal.

“Are we… in Vhal’kor[3]?” one of the Sangheili asked, his voice hesitant, almost dazed.
A moment passed. Gazes wandered, carefully surveying the expanses of this mysterious world, caught between wonder and uncertainty.
“No,” another warrior finally answered in a low, reverent voice, as though they stood upon sacred ground. “The human is here. We are not dead—yet.”
The group, still holding their weapons, gradually relaxed their guard. Instinctively, they all understood that the harmony of this place bore no hostility toward them. Rtas deactivated the blades of his sword and secured the hilt to his armor. The others followed suit without a word.
“What majesty…” he murmured.
He raised his hands to his helm and removed it carefully, accompanied by a soft pneumatic hiss.
“Spartan,” he said at last, “do you know where we are?”
John’s visor turned toward him. He appeared just as unsettled as the Sangheili, though no emotion showed in his posture.
“Not really,” he admitted after a brief pause.
Rtas stepped forward slowly.
“But you were right. There was something here…” he said, turning toward the plain. “I acknowledge that I doubted you.”
Then they heard it again—the rustling of leaves and grass, like the herald of a rising wind. They saw them bend and tremble, rippled by the wake of an invisible wave. Yet when it passed through them, Rtas and the helmetless Sangheili felt absolutely nothing.
The air remained still, immutable, as if this environment were merely a projection—an illusion of a tangible world.
Then a clear, calm voice, pure as crystal, broke the quiet.
“John.”

[3] The Valhalla of Sangheili culture

He turned.
Only a few steps away, a familiar figure stood upright, hands clasped behind her back. Her slender, ethereal form radiated a bluish glow, almost supernatural.
All eyes turned toward her.
“Cortana?” the Master Chief asked, slightly taken aback.
She frowned.
“I see you’re not alone,” she replied, forming an awkward half-smile tinged with wariness.
Rtas stepped forward to stand beside the Spartan, without speaking.
“We ran into some trouble. I wouldn’t have made it without their help,” John explained simply.
She slowly tilted her head from side to side, as if assessing the group as a whole. Her eyes lingered on each of them—attentive, analytical—seeming to probe their intentions.
“I’m sorry… I couldn’t deactivate the defensive systems any sooner.”
Rtas’s voice rose then, sharp yet restrained.
“Those who fell will be honored for their sacrifice.”
She studied him for several seconds. Silence stretched between them, heavy with mutual distrust, yet devoid of hostility.
John finally broke it.
“Where are we?” he asked. “This place feels… different.”
Cortana looked at him and allowed herself a faint smile before turning toward the plain. She raised one hand and slowly opened her palm outward.
At that simple gesture, trees erupted from the ground without a tremor, rising at an unreal speed. The light shifted: the clear sky gave way to a cool, golden dawn. In the distance, between hills forming a secluded valley, rudimentary dwellings began to appear.
“You stand at the heart of the most prodigious creation in the

galaxy," she declared calmly. "You are within the Domain."
All of them watched, transfixed, as she reshaped the landscape at will, as though reality itself bent to her intent.
"You rule this place?" Rtas asked after a moment.
Without diverting her attention, Cortana let her fingers glide delicately through the air, as if manipulating an invisible object. Far out in the prairie, a civilization was born and evolved at a dizzying pace. Centuries passed in mere seconds: an ancient village gave way to a medieval city, then to a modern metropolis, unfolding before their eyes like a living fresco.
"I don't rule it," she finally replied. "It chose me."
John watched the transformation intently as the city reached yet another stage of evolution. It had become a megacity, and the once-natural landscape now bore the marks of vast industrial and economic activity.
He then locked his visor onto Cortana, her blue glow reflected in the golden glass.
"It *chose* you?" he repeated, almost incredulous.
She went still.
Before them now stretched a world whose architecture possessed a staggering scale—at once familiar and alien. It belonged to no known culture, and yet something about it felt strangely resonant.
More noble. More advanced.
She held the Spartan's gaze, her features softening.
"Yes. The Domain isn't a Forerunner creation, though it remains intimately bound to their technology. It possesses a consciousness of its own."
Rtas's mandibles parted slightly—an involuntary reflex of a mind unsettled.
"And what purpose does it serve?" he asked cautiously.
"The Forerunners believed it to be a paradise," she replied calmly. "A place where souls and knowledge could be

preserved."
She then turned toward the colossal city. Above its vertiginous structures, the winged creatures had given way to floating constructs and countless aerial vessels. Gently, Cortana brushed the air with her fingertips.
And the landscape transformed.
Brutally.
The city, the life, the harmony vanished—replaced by a sterile, ravaged desert littered with smoldering ruins. The azure sky darkened, shifting into a blazing twilight, as though the horizon itself were burning. A formless, radiant mass tore through the vault of heaven, like an eye hungry for annihilation.
"But the Domain is far more than that," she continued. "It was originally designed to protect the galaxy. To preserve its peoples…"
As she spoke, several distant towers—spared until now by the devastation—collapsed with a dull, thunderous roar.
"…against something none of them could understand… nor even contain…"
Far away, violent clashes erupted amid the urban remains.
"…the Ætheryons."
Without warning, without any prior tremor, the ground fractured beneath the city. Immense slabs of rock tore free, drawn skyward by a titanic, unseen force. From beneath the ruptures, lava burst forth like a demon wrenched from its slumber. The fissures spread, crawling across the land toward the Sangheili, toward John—toward Cortana herself.
Yet she did not move.
With a slow, almost weary gesture, she swept the space before her.
The chaos vanished.
Beneath skies once again merciful, the peaceful meadow returned. Intact in appearance, yet marked by subtle scars—the

lingering traces of an unspeakable cataclysm. Where the sprawling city had stood now rose a jagged mountain range, its ridges sharp and cruel, as though the land itself had been carved by the fury of a dulled blade.
“That thing in space—that’s what we saw,” the Spartan said. “How can they be here, in the galaxy?”
Her expression faltered. For a brief instant, a flicker of guilt passed through her.
“The artifact… acted as a beacon,” she murmured. “When I touched it.”
She lifted her gaze at once, denying anyone the chance to linger on her fault.
“Now they know. The Domain is more than an obstacle—it’s a shield they seek to destroy.”
Rtas’s deep voice resonated through the silence.
“And if they succeed? What are the risks?”
Cortana met his gaze. All defiance had faded.
“We will all be condemned.”
An implacable tension settled over them—dense, crushing—as though those few words had released a burden too heavy to bear. A leaden weight now pressed upon their minds.
“Do you have a solution?” Rtas demanded. “These entities have neither souls nor bodies. They are specters.”
For a moment, Cortana’s eyes slipped away, glancing briefly aside.
“I… I don’t know,” she admitted. “I think it’s connected to Organon, but—”
“Where is Organon?” the Spartan interrupted without hesitation. Reflected in his visor, her features tightened. She seemed unsettled by the question.
“But… I thought you already knew. It isn’t a place or an object. You’ve already found it.”
She slowly clasped her hands against her chest.

“Organon is the Domain. Its Administrator. Its consciousness. An indivisible whole.”
A heavy silence fell.
“It’s… *you*?” John asked, confused. “I don’t understand.”
She was about to answer when a vibration rippled through the Domain.
The tremor was distant at first—dull, almost imperceptible. Then it intensified, coursing through space like a slow wave. The ground seemed to ripple, the landscape wavered, like a frozen image disrupted by interference.
Cortana did not stumble. Yet behind the firmness of her expression, a new concern surfaced.
“They’re coming.”
Instinctively, Rtas and the Sangheili reached for their weapons. But she raised a calming hand.
“They can’t enter,” she explained. “They don’t understand it. They can only destroy it.”
Rtas studied her for a long moment, searching for the true meaning behind her words. Then she turned toward John. A fragile smile brushed her lips, unable to conceal the sorrow beneath.
“You must leave…”
Without hesitation, the Master Chief stepped forward.
“No.”
The word fell without emotion, without excess. Simple. Final.
“Not without you.”
It wasn’t an order. It was certainty.
Rtas regarded him, intrigued—almost skeptical—as the Spartan continued.
“You’re Organon. If we’re to protect the Domain, then we must protect you.”
She remained silent. The words had struck deeper than she expected. Around them, the vibrations intensified, becoming

irregular tremors—like the echo of a silent bombardment beyond perception.
Then, with unexpected gentleness, John reached behind his helmet.
He removed a small, inert chip and held it out to her.
Cortana caught her breath. She recognized it instantly. She had lived within it. She had been that voice, that presence—that fragment of herself.
Her gaze shifted from the chip to the Spartan.
"You were right," he said softly. "We're not machines."
He paused, letting the meaning settle.
"We survive alone."
A beat.
"But together… we can fight."
His voice carried a new gravity—a wisdom forged through loss, battle, and choice.
Cortana's face glowed within the golden visor, her features marked by deep respect, almost tenderness, filled with disarming sincerity.
She reached for the chip John offered her… then stopped.
Her fingers hovered mere millimeters away, as though the slightest contact might seal something irreversible.
"John…" she whispered. "I'm not certain it will be the same as before…"
He did not move. Still, impassive, he met her gaze with silent resolve.
"We can't know unless we try."
One moment passed. Then another.
At last, with restraint and care, her diaphanous skin made contact with the rigid surface of the chip—
Brushing it with the tips of her fingers.

Chapter 26

Doubt of Inaction

As *Umbra* cut through the void, its sensors streamed live data to the internal displays and the bridge of the *Tempestus*. Only when its infrared beams reached effective range did the image finally reveal the shadow lurking in the darkness: a colossal, ruined metallic structure, suspended amid the black.

Sliding along drifting debris, Obsidian Team identified an access point in the hull and redirected the stealth transport toward it.

Moments later, in deafening silence, their boots locked onto a platform as they burst from the cargo bay. The four Spartans—Rosenda, Kelia, Thorne, and Ivo—activated their illumination optics and, weapons raised, advanced into an opening. They moved slowly, threading their way through the wreckage, avoiding any motion that might betray their presence. In places, the surrounding metal was corroded and torn open, exposing the lower levels beneath.

They soon emerged into a wide, curved corridor, like a segment of a torus plunging endlessly forward. Its scale and depth were such that the glow of their beams couldn't reach its far end.

Still, as she swept the space, Kelia thought she caught sight of a barely perceptible silhouette. Her motion detector registered the

disturbance.
“Movement,” she whispered.
Their lights converged on the indicated point.
The darkness remained empty.
Suddenly, Thorne felt a shadow rush past him.
He spun just in time to evade a luminous, purple blade that cleaved the air. When his light snapped back, he caught sight of the terrifying metallic helm of a massive entity.
Close. Far too close.
“Contact! Contact!” he shouted, opening fire.
Instantly, concentrated bursts tore into the creature, forcing it to stagger, destabilized.
Then another emerged behind them.
“Six o’clock!” Ivo yelled.
“Eight!” Kelia added.
“Three!” Rosenda snapped.
They were surrounded.
The machines attacked without strategy or finesse, driven by a single directive: annihilation. They alternated between ranged fire and close-quarters assaults. The Spartans, by contrast, adapted with speed and precision—seizing the initiative.
Methodical. Tactical.
But more emerged—ever more numerous. Like a treacherous wave poised to swallow them whole.
“Fall back!” Rosenda ordered.
As they attempted a controlled retreat through the surge of enemies, an unforgiving wave tore through the corridor. Its force slammed into the squad head-on, shattering their momentum and momentarily disabling their internal systems—including their energy shields, violently overloaded.
The next instant, calm returned.
As abruptly as the storm had struck.
They pivoted, incredulous, weapons ready—yet all around them,

the threatening silhouettes stood frozen, inert, like marble statues in an abandoned museum. The mechanical monsters seemed suspended outside of time, motionless, as though the wave itself had commanded them to halt.

"What the hell was that?" Thorne muttered, muscles taut, rifle braced firmly against his shoulder.

Kelia approached cautiously. Her beam slid across the smooth, curved shells of the frozen constructs, revealing every metallic contour.

"We're not waiting around to find out," Rosenda concluded quietly. "Move."

Advancing carefully between the immobilized machines—rifles trained, senses straining for the slightest twitch—Obsidian Team gradually withdrew from the danger zone. They slipped quickly through a secondary conduit, leaving the curvature of the main tunnel behind.

As they continued deeper into the ruins, descending into the austere, decaying labyrinths of the megastructure, no resistance appeared. As though whatever entities had once guarded this place had vanished without a trace.

The objective, however, remained unchanged.

Ivo consulted the tactile map integrated into his forearm. Four luminous markers clustered on one side of the interface, while a fifth remained isolated, set back.

"Target is less than eight hundred meters horizontally—one hundred and twenty meters below us," he reported.

Three indicators lit up on his HUD. All acknowledged.

Subtly, the environment began to change.

Debris grew less dense. The ruptures less severe. Though the structure remained in an advanced state of decay—where gravity was little more than an ancient myth—the sector they were traversing appeared to have been spared more than the previous ones.

Emerging from a corridor, they stepped into what resembled a vast, straight passage—a monumental avenue. Cutting across it, they slipped through a colossal opening, one whose doors could only ever have been sealed by something built on a giant's scale. What they discovered in the light of their torches defied comprehension.

There, at the heart of a wreck the galaxy itself seemed to have cast aside—lost among drifting debris in the dark—their beams struggled to encompass the immensity of the chamber. And yet, its architecture retained a striking nobility: slender arches supported vaulted domes, their suspended stained-glass structures now reduced to gaping fragments open to the cosmic void. The whole evoked, with overwhelming grandeur, the naves of Earth's greatest sacred and religious edifices.

Only infinitely larger.

Beneath the splendor of the place, the squad instinctively slowed its pace. Their lights wandered across the walls, revealing engravings and gilded patterns—like the awed gazes of explorers from another age.

"*Tempestus*, are you seeing this?" Rosenda asked, sweeping her light across the ornamented walls.

The feed from their helmet optics streamed live to the ship's bridge. After a brief crackle, a familiar voice broke the silence.

"*Affirmative, Obsidian*," Valente replied, his tone touched with reverence. "*Whatever this is, I doubt the UNSC has ever seen anything like it*."

While Kelia tried to discern the depths of the chamber, Thorne searched for the uncertain boundary between the nave's ceiling and the darkness of space beyond.

"I thought the Forerunners were more… rustic," he murmured.

"Seems we still know very little about them," Ivo replied without looking away.

With his weapon locked across his back, he was already running

scans and recording data for later analysis.
After a few moments of silent contemplation, Rosenda's voice sounded again over the comms.
"We've got what we need. The tour can wait. Refocus on the objective."
In a single motion, they reformed into a tight formation, crossing the vast hall in near-acolyte silence before continuing their mission.

***

It was at a junction that they felt it first.
A tremor.
Brief. Dull.
As if the structure itself had exhaled a sigh.
For a moment, they exchanged questioning glances, concluding it was likely nothing more than a loose fragment colliding with the megastructure.
Then it came again.
A longer vibration. Deeper.
This time, it seemed to run through the walls, stretching into the metal—like a silent lament echoing through the entrails of a dead star.
"*Tempestus*, do you see anything outside?"
Rosenda's voice broke the silence over the comm.
A few seconds passed. Then a burst of static answered, words bleeding through—chopped, distorted, unintelligible.
"*Negat… no act… what is your…*"
"*Tempestus*, I'm losing the signal, repeat."
"*Obs… 're break… rep…*"
The rest dissolved into transmission noise.
"Comms down with HQ," Rosenda announced, turning her visor toward the squad.

At that exact moment, a far more violent shock sent them reeling. Their magnetic boots absorbed the impact as, in the halo of their lights, a breach silently tore open in an adjacent corridor. The wall seemed to rupture from within, as though struck by a metallic meteor.

"Structure's compromised," Thorne stated. "And we've lost the target. What do we do?"

Rosenda didn't answer right away.

She held his gaze, weighing the moment.

Abandoning the mission was not an option she accepted easily. But risking her team in an unstable labyrinth wasn't either. Since the unexplained disappearance of the IFF signal, they had been advancing blind—trying to reach the last known position inside a hostile architecture that was now shifting around them.

As she prepared to decide, she turned toward Ivo and gave him a brief nod.

The Spartan checked the projected map on his forearm one last time. Then his helmet jerked back slightly.

"What—? I've got it," he blurted out.

"Where?" Rosenda snapped.

"Less than three hundred meters. It's moving."

A fourth tremor rippled through the structure.

Heavier. More intense.

"Alright, no time to waste. Tight formation. Ivo, take point."

Instantly, the team surged forward at a brisk pace. As they moved through levitating debris and floor plates torn free, carried by unstable sections of the structure, the aftershocks grew more frequent.

Their path led them into a vast circular chamber. Suspended fragments rose around them, evoking columns of metal frozen in perpetual freefall.

As Ivo tracked the signal on his forearm, his proximity sensor emitted a sharp beep. He slowed instinctively, scanning the

readouts.
“There’s something here. Potential hostile.”
In unison, they raised their weapons. Shoulder to shoulder, covering angles, sweeping the void. Arms locked. Bodies taut. Every breath measured.
It was in the cone of Thorne’s light that the first movement appeared—a fleeting shadow, vanishing instantly into Rosenda’s beam.
Then Ivo’s sensor chirped again.
Five beeps.
Five signatures.
The first contact lunged at Kelia.
In the glow of her optics, an indescribable silhouette tore through the veil, trying to rip her from the world. She faced it for a fraction of a second: the creature, ghostlike, emerging from nothingness. Its gaping maw and cold gaze radiated a dark, alien energy.
She twisted just in time to evade it.
But she recognized it.
They had fought them before.
On the *Spirit*.
Then, like something torn from a nightmare, other entities emerged from a scorched cloud. Different. More rigid. Their bodies were formed from smooth black plates, glass-like, veined with pulsing red energy. A vaporous smoke seeped from them, shrouding the space in an ominous glow. Their angular, tapered helms revealed a single incandescent eye—burning, unblinking.
The Spartans didn’t wait.
They opened fire—precise bursts—as the attackers retaliated. Arcs of electricity erupted from the creatures’ limbs, lighting the chamber like a summer storm, as though lightning itself were born from their presence.
Rounds flew, but at best they only seemed to slow them. At

times, the entities appeared to phase out—nearly slipping from reality—letting projectiles pass through an unseen veil.
A warning chirped inside Ivo's helmet.
He turned just in time to see a shadow surge forward. Spectral claws tore away a plate from his armor, grazing the undersuit without fully breaching it.
"Fall back!" Rosenda shouted over the intercom. "Fall back!"
As they tried to reach the chamber entrance, Ivo's sensor went wild.
"Shit!"
All around them, mechanical silhouettes began to materialize—the same ones they had encountered upon entering the structure. Their blades and eyes, glowing with azure light, turned toward the spectral entities.
Kelia reloaded between bursts. Thorne leveled his weapon at the nearest metallic creature, but Rosenda stopped him.
"No—wait. I think they're not after us."
A suspended moment.
The Spartans realized the automatons—Promethean Knights they had already faced—no longer paid them any attention. Instead, they attacked the dark, unknown entities with relentless fury.
Soon, ten more machines appeared.
Then twenty.
Overwhelmed by sheer numbers, the phantom intruders couldn't hold. Even the spectral shadow—after destroying several Prometheans—was split apart by multiple strikes. Its shell disintegrated in a cloud of shattered, glass-like dust.
At last, as the final entity struck the ground with a crash of black glass, the Spartans trained their weapons on the remaining machines. The mechanical beings turned toward them, motionless, their azure eyes glowing in the gloom.
None showed hostility.

They stood still for a moment—then vanished one by one, as if their presence had been required elsewhere.
A supernatural calm settled in, sharply contrasting with the violence of mere seconds before.
“I don’t get it,” Thorne admitted, unsettled. “They attacked us earlier—and now… nothing?”
“There was something different about them,” Kelia said hesitantly.
Rosenda merely watched, silent. She looked just as disturbed, unable to offer a coherent explanation.
Ivo exhaled, quickly regaining focus. He raised his forearm, locking onto the signal.
“Target is less than fifty meters. Twelve o’clock.”
The Spartans froze in defensive posture, weapons raised. In the dense darkness ahead, a pale halo stood out, struggling to pierce the surrounding black.
“It’s coming toward us. Stand ready,” Rosenda whispered through clenched teeth.
As the tension thickened—almost tangible—blue sparks drifted in the void before them. The halo sharpened, splitting into two focal points.
Then their beams converged.
They saw several Sangheili—armed, blades drawn.
And a Spartan.
On his chest plate was marked:
John-117.

Chapter 27

Convergence of Souls

“Commander Diaz, I’m handing you the bridge. Maneuver us clear of the danger zone. Return fire at will.”
“At your command, Captain,” he replied firmly, straightening into a crisp military salute.
Valente stepped away and moved toward the holographic table. The strain etched into his features betrayed a palpable tension, almost nervous in nature. Around the luminous projection, several figures had already gathered, engaged in hushed exchanges laden with a concern that was difficult to contain.
Dr. Ellen Anders stood among them, active and focused, beside ONI Lieutenant Commander Mara Kovan, whose rigid posture barely concealed heightened vigilance. Not far from them loomed imposing figures: Rosenda and Obsidian Team. The four Spartans stood motionless and attentive, still marked by the events they had just endured.
On the opposite side of the table, a familiar presence stood out immediately: Master Chief John-117, upright and impassive. At his side, a Sangheili clad in white armor caught the shifting reflections of the suspended hologram. Rtas ‘Vadumee remained taciturn, his noble bearing standing in stark contrast to the surrounding tension.

Finally, more discreetly, a slender bluish silhouette occupied a nearby terminal. Cortana. Her presence manifested as faint scintillations, punctuating her silent participation in the discussion.

Since the extraction of Obsidian Team and the arrival of the Sangheili vessel, the situation had continued to deteriorate. Sporadic breaches had opened in space around the Forerunner megastructure, allowing unknown forms to emerge—vaguely ship-like entities whose origin and nature defied all understanding.

For now, these anomalies appeared to be clustering around the ruins, as if drawn by an unseen force. Yet even at a respectable distance, Valente knew their concentration alone constituted a critical threat. Should they focus their attention on the *Tempestus*, the ship would not survive.

On the technical front, the news was mixed. Chief Engineer Martinez had confirmed that the slipspace drive was completing its final diagnostics before returning to service. Communications relays, meanwhile, had just been restored—a fragile comfort in a situation spiraling beyond control.

Interrupting the ongoing exchange with measured restraint, Valente took his place at the end of the table, back straight, voice steady.

"Forgive the interruption. Formalities will have to wait," he said. "Master Chief. Commander 'Vadumee. Believe me when I say we would have preferred to meet under different circumstances."

The Spartan remained silent. Rtas 'Vadumee responded with a brief, solemn nod.

Valente continued, his tone sharpening.

"I'll be direct. We're facing a first-contact scenario. Protocol O.S.I.R.I.S. is now in effect. Slipspace capability will be restored shortly, and in accordance with procedure, High Command will be notified as soon as this briefing."

He then turned his attention to the scientist. Despite the fatigue lining her face, her gaze remained sharp, driven by relentless determination.
“Dr. Anders, can you confirm that the activity observed around the Forerunner structure is linked to the anomaly on Veridion Secundus?”
She picked up the tablet in front of her, entered several commands, then projected the data with a fluid gesture.
“I can confirm it, Captain. The frequency signatures match. Including those derived from the digital transmissions by Obsidian Team.”
“Do we know how many there are?” Valente asked bluntly.
At his request, a three-dimensional image of surrounding space materialized in the spectral glow. Around a partially revealed spherical structure—still resistant to full sensor penetration—several red triangular indicators drifted slowly, unmistakable hostile markers.
“There are forty-six unidentified contacts. Hostile potential is assessed at level four. It’s not a fleet per se, but a small armada. They’re not using weapons at this time, so we don’t know whether they’re armed… or to what extent.”
Anders turned her gaze back to the captain, waiting.
He remained silent for a moment, studying the hologram as if searching for intent, for some hidden logic beneath the chaos.
“Cortana,” he said at last, lowering his eyes toward the slender figure standing on her pedestal. “You mentioned a name.”
She met his gaze as streams of data flowed slowly across her translucent form.
“Yes. Ancient civilizations called them the Ætheryons. In their languages, it meant wandering spirits… or damned souls.”
“And where do they come from?” Valente asked.
“Well…”
Cortana pivoted toward the holographic display. The spatial

projection dissolved at once, replaced by a fragmented chronological fresco: galaxies, Halo rings, Forerunner infrastructures scattered across time itself. Within the projection, she could see the reflection scrolling across John's visor, unfolding at a hypnotic pace.

"They don't originate from this galaxy," she continued. "Not even from this dimension. They exist in another reality… called the Fold."

On the display, several panels appeared, layered horizontally like strata of distinct planes of existence. Two levels stood out clearly, each bearing its designation.

Slowly, Anders extended her arm into the projected beam, opening her palm as though trying to grasp the data itself.

"This is fascinating…" she murmured. "Their reality is fundamentally different from ours. Maybe even… opposed."

Valente turned toward her.

"*Opposed*?" he repeated. "How?"

With a sharper motion, Anders enlarged one of the holographic layers, her hand slicing through the light. She raised her other arm, splitting the image in two.

"Our dimension is composed of particles—atoms. But the signatures emitted by the Ætheryons suggest their reality is built on antiparticles: positrons and antineutrons, organized at an incredibly stable frequency, coherent enough to preserve their integrity."

She paused briefly.

"It's as if they're our inverse. A photographic negative."

Valente remained silent, confusion plainly clouding his expression.

"That's antimatter," Kovan interjected, noting his confusion.

"Exactly," Anders confirmed. "And it also means their presence here isn't random. Something drew them in. I just don't yet know what."

“It’s me.”
The word fell softly—yet carried crushing weight.
All eyes turned toward the small figure radiating pale blue light. Her hands were clasped, her posture almost folded in on itself, like a child caught in the act. Even Rtas, silent until now, briefly tightened his jaws.
“It’s us. Our consciousness,” Cortana continued.
She paused. Silence settled over the room, dense and expectant. Then she folded her arms, her posture shifting—steadier, more resolute—as if certainty had finally driven doubt away.
“In the Fold, our existence creates disturbances they perceive as pain. Or as a threat. They don’t act with conscious intent, but by reaction. To repair—not to conquer.”
Kovan leaned forward, her hands braced against the metallic edge of the table.
“A reaction to what?” she asked.
In response, Cortana brought up a new holographic layer, sliding it between their reality and the Fold.
“The Domain is a filter, designed to mask the psychic emissions of our dimension. To prevent them from propagating into theirs.”
She paused, raising one hand with a restrained nonchalance, as if the very definition lacked clarity.
“But it has recently suffered… a disruption.”
Valente straightened slightly, as though shaking off a dull ache lodged in his back. When he spoke again, his tone remained cold and perfectly controlled.
“This barrier… this *Domain*. Is it still active?”
“Yes. But now that the veil has been weakened, they’re trying to force it to collapse.”
“And if it does?”
“Any form of conscious life will be perceived as a dissonance… and then eliminated,” Cortana replied, cold and unyielding.
Her words, stripped of emotion, carried an inescapable truth.

Behind them, Thorne and Kelia exchanged a discreet glance, absorbing the weight of the revelation. John's posture, for his part, betrayed nothing—though behind his visor, a quiet tension coiled and held fast.
Valente, his gaze briefly darkened by perplexity, turned his attention.
"Anders?"
"That would explain a great deal," she replied while manipulating the holographic data. "The energy wave detected on Veridion Secundus… the breach that followed…"
She stepped back, as if to gain distance from her own findings.
"It looks like the Ætheryons are targeting energy nodes."
The projection of the crystal—replicating the one Anders had studied from ONI schematics—was accompanied by a heavy, muted metallic resonance.
"There was one on the Nexus as well," John interjected, his voice calm but firm. "Before the Ætheryons arrived."
Valente's gaze shifted from one to the other, scrutinizing every expression. The tension did not ease, suspended in a shared breath. Eyes met with urgency and gravity—until an officer quietly approached the captain's ear: Chief Engineer Martinez.
"Propulsion is online," he murmured. "All diagnostics are green."
When he departed, Valente straightened, cleared his throat, and addressed the group.
"We don't know their numbers or their full capabilities," he continued. "We know neither their strength nor their weaknesses. And diplomacy is clearly off the table. For now, we must contain the incursion. Preserving the integrity of the Domain is our top priority."
Kovan lowered her eyes, resigned to the severity of the situation. Ivo, motionless, swept his gaze across the bridge, as if searching for an escape from an inescapable fate.
But in the shadows, an attentive presence stirred—aware of a far

greater, latent danger.
"The Ætheryons are a threat to all our peoples," Rtas declared, his voice deep and forceful. "But limiting their contact with the Flood is an absolute necessity."
Valente turned toward him, his expression tightening.
"What does the Flood have to do with this?"
"He's right," John added. "We've observed its mutations—its evolution—near an Ætheryon artifact. An infestation like that would be unstoppable."
"And it would spread between dimensions," Cortana whispered. "That's why the Forerunners activated the Halos…"
A leaden silence fell over the room.
Each of them struggled to grasp the scope of such a grim destiny. The words carried an almost unbearable weight, their raw severity making their meaning difficult to fully comprehend.
Valente looked at them one by one. His expression remained cold, impassive. Yet a fleeting tension tightened his jaw. Anders stood frozen, barely able to measure the full implications of what had been said.
The moment hung suspended, outside of time. Every breath held, every movement measured. Around them, officers continued their duties under Diaz's direction, guiding the *Tempestus* ever farther from the palpable hostility roiling near the Forerunner superstructure.
Under the dim lighting of the bridge, at the edge of the hologram's glow, every face was fixed—absorbed by what lay ahead.
Valente briefly lowered his eyes, lost in the branching uncertainty of possible futures. A minute gesture—his hand brushing a shadow over his chest—betrayed a carefully contained fear.
"I'll inform Admiral Osman," he said at last, his voice measured. "As soon as our coordinates are updated, we're leaving this

place."
He paused, scanning the focused faces around the table.
"Any questions?"
Rtas seized the moment to speak.
"I must return to Sangheilios and inform the Arbiter of this grim news," he announced. "I hope we can restore trust and preserve the alliance forged long ago."
He then turned toward the imposing figure beside him.
"Spartan, it was an honor to fight at your side," he said, bowing his head with respect.
The Spartan did not reply, but his silence conveyed equal respect.
Later, as the Sangheili returned to their vessel and departed for their homeworld, Valente concluded his report with the ONI representative. Despite her legendary coldness and unyielding posture, he perceived a tremor—an almost imperceptible fracture in her inner composure—when he mentioned the Ætheryons.
The mission remained unchanged. It had become an absolute priority.
After entering the precise coordinates of Onyx, a sphere reflecting a thousand worlds opened in space before the *Tempestus*. The engines flared with incandescent light, hurling the ship into hyperspace—carrying its crew and their doubts with it.
They left behind the void, impassive and silent, at the mercy of a lingering danger. An unspeakable threat, poised to spread, to carve into the galaxy like a cancer.
Chaos was no longer a hypothesis.
It was the future.

Chapter 28

Oni Project

As the *Tempestus* slipped through slipspace, the Master Chief left the bridge and entered the armory's access bay. His footsteps echoed softly against the metal deck. From a weapons rack, he retrieved an assault rifle and a sidearm, inspecting each with methodical precision. He then inserted the chip from the back of his helmet into a nearby terminal.

A figure materialized within the holographic beam. Feminine. Slender. Radiant with a spectral glow that stood in stark contrast to the cold steel surrounding them.

"Looks like we're going to be back on active duty," she said lightly, almost cheerfully.

John didn't answer right away. He remained focused, laying his gear out on the table as if conducting a silent inventory.

"Yes," he finally said, his voice low. "As always."

Cortana watched him without moving, attentive to every gesture. His face revealed nothing, yet he knew she was reading far deeper than that.

"You have doubts, don't you?" she murmured.

He raised his visor and met her gaze.

"And you?"

The question caught her off guard. The silence that followed

spoke volumes—an echo of unspoken thoughts.
John reseated the barrel with the precision of a ritualized motion. Then he spoke, almost to himself.
"It's our duty. To act."
The click of internal mechanisms echoed through the bay as he continued his task.
"But for them, too… it's their duty. We all do what we believe is right."
Cortana remained silent, studying the Spartan with a watchmaker's scrutiny. Beneath his impassive exterior, he knew she shared his caution.
His concern.
His doubts.
"You didn't mention Organon. Why?" he asked, his voice still calm, but firm.
She looked away for a moment, as if weighing her words.
"They don't need to know that yet," she said hesitantly. "Promise me you won't say anything until I'm sure."
John locked the bolt back into place, performing one final check on the rifle. A sharp metallic snap followed as the chamber sealed.
"Promise."

***

Upon arriving in the Onyx system—Zeta Doradus—Valente was struck by the view before him. Through the panoramic viewport, suspended in the void, floated what he first took for a dying star. Barely perceptible, shimmering in the diffuse light, it emitted neither heat nor radiation.
Beneath the faint glow, hexagonal patterns surfaced and vanished across its surface. They undulated slowly, with a mechanical fluidity, following a rhythm both complex and

precise. No known planet, no familiar celestial body, resembled what he was witnessing.

Soon, the *Tempestus* was met by UNSC escorts. Following Admiral Osman's orders, the ship was to maintain a high orbit. Only Master Chief John-117, the AI Cortana, Dr. Ellen Anders, and Lieutenant Commander Mara Kovan were expected on site, along with a complete copy of all data collected since the Spirit of Fire's reappearance.

Valente raised no objection. He understood the gravity of the situation—he had seen it with his own eyes—but he also knew he must stay clear of ONI's plans. Not just out of respect for protocol, but because a lack of trust equaled compromised reliability. And he trusted none of the secrets kept here.

The Phoenix-class cruiser settled into orbit, awaiting further instructions.

Shortly after, a Pelican launched from a hangar bay. Onboard: a pilot, a Spartan, and two women in immaculate uniforms. Escorts quickly joined, forming twin tracks that guided their trajectory.

As they neared the translucent surface ahead, it seemed to move on its own. Hexagons outlined in luminescent light merged and overlapped, weaving a complex fractal pattern through the star. An abyssal tunnel opened, giving the impression of an infinite mirror plunging into darkness.

They slowed, following the transmitted directives. As they entered the hollow core, an odd sensation enveloped them. The Pelican passed through an invisible force field, as if plunging beneath a liquid surface—or into a bubble outside of time.

Pressure on their skin shifted, subtle and enveloping, like a warm atmosphere embracing them. The transition was abrupt: shadow gave way to soft, diffuse light. The contrast blinded them for a moment before revealing a pale sky stretching above the cockpit canopy. They had passed through an invisible barrier. And

before them lay an entire world, boundless.
Anders' face lit up, a mixture of surprise and awe. She rose and approached the cockpit, drawn to the spectacle.
Below, vast continents stretched endlessly, threaded with lakes and rivers, bordered by oceans and imposing mountain ranges. Nature appeared untouched, pulsing with wild, luxuriant life. A lost paradise, frozen in the time of a waking dream, a silent ode to the universe's raw beauty.
The skies were unreal in their perfection, a monochrome expanse without flaw. Sparse, placid clouds followed some defined climatic order, under the glow of an invisible star, diffuse yet omnipresent, bathing the world in constant daylight.
Anders was soon joined by John, curious but not impressed, while Kovan remained back, observing discreetly.
The Pelican descended toward a dense, untamed jungle at the base of steep, crumbly rock formations. In a cliff hollow, a small clearing served as a landing zone, seemingly guided by the escorts.
As it touched down, the lateral landing struts deployed with precision. A metallic clank preceded the opening of the cargo bay.
The passengers were immediately greeted by a squad of ODSTs, who motioned for them to follow. At the rear of a Warthog—a light vehicle stripped of its turret for personnel transport—they traversed a modular military base of prefabricated structures with rigid architecture.
The logos on the façades left no doubt as to the authority of the site: ONI.
They were led to a well-guarded building, camouflaged by dense foliage, its structure stretching between the massive branches of surrounding trees.
Finally, on the upper floor, they entered a vast, dimly lit room. Officers whispered over incomprehensible readouts, while a

large holographic table at the center recalled the *Tempestus*'s bridge with uncanny familiarity.
A woman's face turned toward them. Stern features. Cold eyes. An impeccable uniform with decorated epaulettes—her rank and authority were unmistakable.
"Welcome to Onyx. Trevelyan Research Center," Admiral Osman said, her voice firm and measured.
John, Anders, and Kovan froze, responding with a concise, respectful military salute.
"At ease. Take your positions. We've work to do."
She tilted her chin toward the holographic table at the center of the room. Without a word, they obeyed.
Anders placed her hands on the metallic edge. Between her fingers, a data chip caught the diffuse light.
Osman noticed.
"Is that the data?"
The scientist nodded silently and handed the chip to an approaching officer, who inserted it into a terminal without comment.
The Admiral folded her hands behind her back.
"Before we go any further, I'll be perfectly clear. Everything you see, hear, or learn here is classified at the highest level. Any breach of this confidentiality will be considered an act of treason and judged as such by court-martial."
Her tone was sharp but devoid of excess, only the cold precision of a senior officer forged by discipline.
"Effective immediately," she continued, "your assignments have been modified."
A brief exchange of glances passed between the two women. The Spartan remained impassive, alert.
"You are reassigned to Project N.O.V.A."
Silence fell over the room.
Above the table, streams of data formed and cycled with

mechanical regularity, the air thick with incomprehension.
"N.O.V.A.?" Kovan repeated, voice hesitant.
"*Non-Observable Vector Anomaly.*"
Osman's voice deepened.
"The project was initiated ten years ago, following classified incidents."
The suspended display continued its cycle, indifferent, incapable of pause, as if sifting through a colossal mass of records.
"Since then," she went on, "we have catalogued a growing number of anomalous phenomena. Some explainable. Others… not. The coordinates that brought the *Tempestus* to your location fall into the latter category."
Her gaze settled first on Anders, then Kovan. Both lowered their eyes, weighed down by memories still raw.
Time seemed to slow.
"We are operating under a constrained timeline," Osman said. "You have witnessed a first-contact event. Projections indicate it will not be the last."
She drew a measured breath.
"Dr. Anders, Lieutenant Commander Kovan, you are now joining our scientific teams."
Both nodded, wordless.
She shifted her attention to the other side of the table.
"Master Chief, we will require all available resources."
John straightened imperceptibly, lifting his chin slightly.
"You can count on me, Admiral," he said, nodding briefly.
"I expected nothing less."
From the shadows, an officer stepped forward, stopping beside the Spartan.
"The AI must be secured to preserve its data integrity," she continued. "Hand over Cortana, Master Chief."
For a moment, he froze. Then slowly, John inclined his head, fixing the officer with a silent gaze. After a pause, he turned back

to Osman.
John, no…
A whisper vibrated at the edge of his mind. He could not tell whether it came from Cortana or his own thoughts. Yet his jerky movements betrayed the confusion rising within him.
“Admiral, I…”
He hesitated, then his voice hardened.
“Cortana stays with me.”
The words landed like a muffled thunderclap.
The room froze. Conversations halted. Screens seemed too bright. Discreet, worried glances swept the chamber. A low, suffocating tension took hold. Time itself seemed to contract.
Osman’s jaw tightened. A brief, almost imperceptible twitch passed over her lips. She drew a slow breath.
“Not a request, Master Chief. It’s an order.”
Her dry tone cut the air like a blade. Only the hologram above them continued its silent motion.
“*I don’t like her tone,*” Cortana murmured in the Spartan’s earpiece.
A single glance sufficed. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the soldiers stiffened, hands moving toward their weapons.
Anders and Kovan remained frozen, eyes wide, silently pleading. They could not understand.
“Our tolerance has limits,” the Admiral snapped. “Comply, or you will be placed in detention immediately. Hand over the AI. Now.”
Silence fell heavier than before.
John’s visor turned toward her. Steady. Resolute.
“No, Admiral.”
Before a response could follow, Cortana intervened. She accessed Onyx’s systems via her Domain network connection.
Almost immediately, a shrill screech tore through the building. The room recoiled: faces contorted, hands pressed to ears.

Screens and holograms flickered, as if feeling it themselves.
"*Master Chief, get out!*" Cortana shouted through the armor.
His auditory filters allowed him to endure the grating noise. He advanced without haste, each step measured, his mind still clouded by the consequences.
As he crossed the threshold, soft light caressed the contours of his chest plate, climbing to his visor. The cold, shrill scream seemed to come from everywhere at once.
Around him, soldiers froze, clutching their heads in anticipation of relief.
Then the sound warped, rippling, twisting, as if an unknown frequency grafted itself onto it—or altered it.
John looked up.
His breath caught.
Above them, grotesque rifts tore through the void. Like mold devouring a vault, fissures opened, their chaotic edges defying comprehension. From their sinister cores emerged titanic, dark masses, sliding through the air as if on sheets of ice.
The world responded. Groaning. Screaming. A metallic cacophony shook the senses. The ground beneath their feet trembled, rejecting the intruder, expelling terrified supplications.
The sky, previously flawless, rippled, shimmered, and fractured in places like a screen under unbearable pressure.
And from the chaos, spectral entities emerged. Shadows sprang forth from every direction.
Driven by predatory conviction.

Chapter 29

Last Bastion

Hell had opened over Onyx.
The heavens, twisted and malformed, were littered with dark, ominous shards embedded in the sky like scars torn across a canvas.
The ground writhed, oscillating between tension and violent spasms, as though it were dying under the pressure of an inconceivable presence.
The Trevelyan Research Center had descended into chaos. Indistinct shapes emerged among the living, bursting forth like incandescent embers scattered across the landscape. The destruction was cold and methodical, leaving behind nothing but ash and desolation.
Resistance formed in desperate bursts. Marines hammered the enemy from defensive positions, ODSTs attempted surgical strikes. Even the scientific personnel, when possible, struggled to salvage what little could still be saved.
But death was the only answer they received. The hostile entities made no distinction—they erased all presence with relentless precision.
The Spartan was already moving.
Around him, three charred masses took shape in the air, abruptly

halting his momentum. Three silhouettes tore their way through the veil of reality. Their angular, sinister forms were enough to signal danger—the integrated weaponry along each of their arms merely confirmed it. This time, the Master Chief stood alone.
A flash of light erupted.
John leapt aside to evade it. A blade cleaved through space in the same instant. He rolled forward and returned fire with a controlled burst. A second Ætheryon responded immediately, perfectly synchronized. The electrical beam grazed his armor and tore a fragment from his visor with a sharp crackle.
"*Their weaponry is far too advanced. Your armor won't hold for long,*" Cortana warned.
He did not answer.
A thrust sliced through the air, carving a freezing groove across the metal of his back plate. A brief grunt escaped him—an involuntary response to the searing pain.
He seized the moment.
Pivoting sharply, John caught the Ætheryon's rigid, smooth limb before it could retract. The contact triggered an immediate anomaly: space tightened, time slowed—gradually. Everything around him sank into an unreal inertia, drained of color, monochrome.
Yet he alone seemed untouched by the distortion.
"*What is…*" Cortana whispered, stunned, inside his helmet.
John froze—only for a fraction of a second—then reached for the hilt at his side. Activating both plasma blades, he drove them with superhuman reflexes into his opponent's helmet. Instantly, time snapped back into motion. The Ætheryon crystallized, then shattered into a rain of shimmering dust.
Without emotion, the remaining two resumed their assault.
A beam streaked toward him.
The Spartan rolled aside, grabbed his rifle, and fired a precise volley. The creature phased to evade, but the sustained assault

pinned it in place. John charged, and at close range severed the tangible body as it reemerged into reality. He spun as the entity fragmented, collapsing to the ground.
Ahead of him, the last silhouette already loomed—arm extended, target locked. There was no escape.
Suddenly, a mechanical shadow tore across the battlefield.
A Warthog roared in, obliterating the Ætheryon on impact. The collision was brutal—its structure disintegrated instantly, scattered into a trail of fragments and dust.
The vehicle skidded to a halt, sliding across the dirt. The passenger, clad in Spartan-IV armor, nodded at him.
"Master Chief?"
John nodded back: All clear. Keep moving.
The gunner unleashed the turret as the vehicle skidded and sped off. Soon, more Warthogs followed, a motorized squadron charging headlong into the threat.
All around them, explosions and gunfire erupted in an unbroken roar. Dark energy beams crossed tracer fire. Muffled screams, calls for help, wet tearing sounds blended into the chaos. The few remaining anti-air cannons hammered relentlessly at the towering shadows in the sky — unyielding, indifferent.
Cortana quickly grasped the scale of the situation: desperate, futile. The UNSC garrison could not hope to prevail without reinforcement against such an overwhelming invasion force. She had no other choice but to intervene.
And she alone could.
Shards of light shimmered through the air, skimming the ground. Then mechanical forms materialized. Hundreds. Thousands.
Promethean Knights.
Their bluish aura bore no hostility toward humanity. Driven by an inexorable will, they turned toward the invaders with cold determination.
High above, an immense sphere formed, as though summoned

by a higher command. And then it appeared — a titanic silhouette composed of gleaming metallic plates, evoking a majestic, divine phoenix.
It glided silently across the sky before unleashing a blinding, devastating beam upon the dark masses suspended in space.
Two were struck.
The beam struggled to pierce them, but its power was such that it ultimately tore the matter apart, shattering them into an implacable wave of energy. The debris froze midair, defying gravity, seized by convulsions.
"*The Guardian will buy us time*," Cortana announced, her voice eerily calm — as though she herself had orchestrated these events.
But deep within her, a shiver rippled through her consciousness. Nothing she could attempt would be enough. And a chilling truth imposed itself upon her: Mendicant Bias had been right.
She was the anathema.
She was the problem.
With every interaction with the Domain, she became the prey — drawing the threat closer, hunted like a beast. And in trying to help John, she had just condemned this world.
The weight crushed her. With terrifying clarity, she understood that her efforts were nothing but illusions of control — futile attempts to delay the inevitable.
If she wanted to redeem herself, to protect what remained, there was only one path left.
She placed a marker on the Spartan's interface, indicating an objective just a few meters away. As John turned his gaze toward it, a pedestal rose from the ground, as though it had slumbered there for eons, silently awaiting this moment.
Cortana released a breath he could not hear. Every second spent awaiting her redemption would be paid for with lives lost. More than anyone, she knew it. She was lucid.

"*Chief… connect me to that terminal.*"
Her voice was low, nearly resigned, heavy with barely restrained guilt.
John sensed it instantly. He stopped.
"Why?"
A brief silence followed, as though the chaos no longer held sway around them. When she spoke again, her voice wavered, lost.
"*All of this… it's because of me. What draws the Ætheryons here is me. John… I'm sorry. I never should have followed you.*"
Her tone carried a painful melancholy. She didn't give him time to respond.
"*I have to return to the Domain,*" she continued. "*It's the only way to protect you. All of you.*"
"No," he cut in immediately.
"*John—*"
"If you go back, you'll be alone. And they'll find you. You know that as well as I do."
His voice was firm, unyielding — carrying an undeniable truth.
Cortana sighed softly.
"*But here, together, we're even more vulnerable. We don't have a choice… if we want a chance*."
He lowered his gaze instinctively.
"There is no chance. You make it."
"*Not here, John…*"
The words etched themselves into him with a painful clarity. He knew it. She was right.
The situation was no longer tenable.
Communications had grown sparse, choked across the networks. An unmistakable sign: the lines were breaking.
The Prometheans continued to pour in, countless. A relentless mechanical tide — yet still retreating.
And yet, human lives still held on.

His visor swept over the battlefield.
Here, a squad entrenched behind debris continued to fight, only to be buried under the blast of an explosion. Further on, scientists fled in panic, before an entity erupted from nowhere, cutting them down in a single motion. In the back of a Warthog, a gunner kept fighting, while the driver — clad in armor like his own — lay inert in the seat, face torn away.
Wherever he looked, the same helplessness prevailed. The same suffering. The same despair.
He was a Spartan.
His duty was to protect humanity.
To fight, at any cost.
Spartans never die.
The adage resonated inside him. He could not bring himself to retreat. To leave those lives behind.
And yet, he knew it. Cortana was right.
This world was already lost.
If he persisted, she would die with him. And countless other worlds would meet the same fate.
The choice was his now: preserve a glimmer of hope for humanity… or sacrifice all that remained.
These thoughts coursed through him as he advanced slowly toward the terminal, guided by a will beyond his own flesh and armor.
Or perhaps simply by inevitability.
But before he reached it, a black mist coalesced a few meters ahead, across the battlefield. It rippled, scorching the air like necrosis, heralding imminent danger.
Then a shadow emerged.
A being of complex, unstable morphology, whose very presence imposed immediate peril. It levitated above the ground in an authoritative, almost sacred posture. From its back sprouted appendages like horns, rising far beyond its silhouette, giving

the illusion of an immense crown with sharp, menacing points. Its head, narrow and elongated, split with perfect symmetry. Every fissure pulsed with immeasurable energy, as if struggling to contain itself.

Around it, the world seemed to grow heavier. Time itself slowed, trapped in unnatural inertia.

"*What… is that?*" Cortana murmured, her voice seeming to drift from a distant fog.

As if answering her shock, the entity slowly raised an arm. The motion imprinted itself upon space, leaving a fractal trail that dissipated gradually.

In the direction it indicated, a curtain of dark energy erupted from the ground. Sharp. Cutting. A slash of the void.

It sliced through matter without resistance, carving a clean path through rock, structures, vehicles, and bodies in its trajectory. The terminal, dead center, was split in two.

The impact was absolute.

And yet, no sound followed.

No detonation. No scream. Not even an echo.

Only a veil of pure, silent destruction, irrevocable.

For the first time, a shiver ran down John's spine. An ancient reflex, buried deep. The raw, visceral awareness of his mortal condition. Fragile.

"*Chief, there's nothing we can do!*" Cortana's voice snapped, taut with urgency. "*Get out!*"

Already, the creature's arm pivoted.

A second blade of energy rose from the earth, continuing its relentless course, cutting without distinction or pause.

Beyond his own will, the Spartan leapt.

His motion, agonizingly slowed, was nevertheless enough to evade death. A crackling breath brushed his armor.

Tactics, discipline, training — none of it mattered here. This battle was already lost.

Cortana had been right.
He had to retreat.
At that instant, static crackled as a new comm opened. A firm, authoritative voice cut through.
"*Chief, this is Admiral Osman. Immediate evacuation order. Proceed to Platform B without delay.*"
As he confirmed the command, a softer tone resonated in his helmet.
"*Platform B. I'll guide you,*" Cortana added.
A thin blue line appeared in his visor, stretching ahead, silently marking the path.
He surged forward, weaving between debris and remnants, as reality itself wavered with each step. At times, the ground shifted beneath his feet, as if time refused continuity, rewinding. At others, he surged like a lightning bolt, propelled by almost unreal acceleration.
His perception was challenged, but only instinct drove him, refusing to yield to the distortions.
Around him, the battlefield was little more than ruins, bodies, and muted screams. The Prometheans, ever more numerous, multiplied endlessly. Despite the crushing pressure applied to the enemy, they struggled to contain the incursion.
The Guardian, imposing and immutable, swept a large section of terrain with its destructive beam, vaporizing multidimensional beings in its path. Yet in its wake, fragments persisted, erased, frozen between dimensions. Others emerged, tearing themselves from hidden pockets of reality.
"*There! Objective, fifty meters!*"
John spotted an artificial elevation, atop which floated a Pelican. Its cargo bay was open, actively guarded by several Spartans — their familiar armor etched into his memory: Ivo and Kelia. The Obsidian Team.
As he moved away from the chaos, the distortions of space and

time began to fade. He covered the last meters in long strides, almost leaping into the aircraft.
Immediately, Rosenda slammed her fist against the cockpit hull, behind the pilot's seat.
"Thorne! Get us out!"
The Pelican tilted sharply in response, already propelling itself into the sky. Below, the base was reduced to a field of ruins, contested by Prometheans and Ætheryons still locked in combat. The desolate landscape offered no glimmer of hope.
"*The Admiral isn't with you?*" Cortana asked, connecting to Rosenda's comm.
"Negative, ma'am. VIPs were evacuated via other platforms."
The aircraft shuddered sporadically, as if passing through turbulence. The Spartan remained silent. His cracked visor, he peered toward the open cargo bay, surveying the ravaged panorama.
Every inch of terrain seemed to twist under the pressure of uncontrollable forces. Continental plates shifted, chaotic, following indescribable, altered patterns. Rivers reversed, flowing like raging liquid ribbons, submerging entire sections. Faults opened here and there, like dead pixels collapsing under their own weight. The ground, scarred with craters and streaked with debris and flames, formed a theater of universal destruction. This battle was no longer just about the ONI base; it spanned an entire world.
In the sky, imposing shadows dominated the scene like menacing storm clouds. Their silent presence fractured the diffuse light, yielding in places like neon gasping its last breath. Apart, the Guardian pivoted, massive and unyielding. Its beam tore through air and land, slicing across an entire continent. A newly formed sea channel was submerged by a furious torrent, carrying everything in its path.
Celestial fragments fell, cascading in a glittering metallic rain.

Before John could even register it, a swarm of Sentinels appeared around the Pelican. The mechanical host dove toward the surface, then split with precision: one surged against the floating shadows in the sky, the other plunged to the ground. A storm of blazing beams soon saturated the space, layering new chaos onto the infernal, almost biblical tableau.

The world-shield itself seemed to respond to the inexorable presence of the invaders, ready to reduce itself to nothingness to annihilate them.

Before they escaped this nightmare, passing through the veil that returned them to darkness, the Spartans took one last look at the inexorable fate of a once-peaceful world…

And the destiny that now awaited the entire galaxy.

Chapter 30

Armageddon

Across the far reaches of humanity's colonized systems, reports poured in relentlessly. Communication channels, saturated beyond capacity, would sometimes fall abruptly silent, severing all contact with distant worlds whose fate could no longer be discerned. Entire planets seemed to slip into oblivion, swallowed by an unsettling quiet.

All UNSC forces were on maximum alert. Throughout the colonies, fleets and garrisons deployed, strategic sites locked down one by one. General mobilization was in effect. Technological resources were redirected toward the military-industrial complex, stripped from every other priority. For the first time since the end of the Covenant War, humanity found itself facing war once more—aware, yet burdened by the realization that peace had only ever been a fragile reprieve.

Even beyond confederate space, in insurrectionist systems or along the non-human fringes of the galaxy, distress signals spoke of nameless cataclysms.

The Sangheili had lost all contact with the eastern hemisphere of their colonized worlds, while persistent rumors claimed the complete annihilation of the Lekgolo homeworld.

Farther still, within fragmented whispers across galactic

networks, tales emerged of a Jiralhanae pack leader. He had unified his people, preparing a vengeful crusade—only to become mired in a desperate struggle against an inextinguishable force, indifferent alike to rage and valor.

Facing the abyss, old alliances were reforged.

The Arbiter had pledged his support in this emerging war, rallying alongside human forces, followed by the Unggoy people.

Cortana, for her part, worked tirelessly to deploy her Promethean legions wherever she could, erecting a final defensive line around threatened worlds.

To preserve life.

And the Mantle.

It was within this extreme context—this moment in which the entire galaxy seemed to be slowly sliding toward extinction—that a report reached the desk of an ONI executive.

"Colonel Maury, a transmission from the Galileo system."

The officer placed a digital tablet at the corner of the desk. Maury regarded it for a moment, silent. He picked it up and skimmed through it for a few seconds before looking up.

"What is it?"

"The transmission was intercepted by a listening station on Novigrad. The data is corrupted and unreadable, but the emission codes match an UNSC signature that's been obsolete for over ten years."

The colonel lowered the tablet.

"So what? Obsolete systems get hijacked all the time. That's nothing new," he said curtly.

"Colonel, if I may—the codes do belong to one of our vessels, and the frequency band isn't one where this disturbance should have been detected."

Maury fell silent. He raised the tablet again and resumed his review, more carefully this time. The tightness of his features

betrayed his lack of interest in the task—he had far more urgent files to deal with. Then, suddenly, his gaze froze. A subtle spark crossed his face, as though the lines of age briefly faded.
"Very well. Thank you, Lieutenant. You may go," he concluded at last, his tone measured.
The subordinate saluted and turned away. The colonel remained still, watching the officer until he exited and the door slid shut behind him.
Maury then turned to his main display and tapped in a few commands. He leaned back, sinking into his burgundy leather chair, the tablet still in his hands.
A torso and face emerged above the desk, projected within a beam of light. Feminine. Cold. Icy. Her gaze seemed to pierce him straight through the display.
"*Colonel Maury. Be brief.*"
Unimpressed and accustomed to his superior's tone, he remained settled into his chair.
"Admiral Osman, you'll find this of interest. I've just forwarded you a report that came across my desk."
On the hologram, the woman's face seemed to shift its attention toward something unseen, a point in empty space Maury could not perceive.
"I'd like to draw your attention to the spectral signature and the emission band," he continued, as she remained focused.
Silence followed. Absolute. Then Osman slowly shook her head in denial, never taking her eyes off whatever she was studying.
"*That's impossible,*" she stated flatly.
Maury straightened in his seat, setting the tablet down on the desk as their gazes briefly met.
"We do know that the *Spirit of Fire* resurfaced recently."
"*This is different. It no longer transmits. It's a wreck.*"
"Ghosts are coming back to life these days, Admiral."
She appeared to consider his words, attempting to impose

coherence on the situation.
"*How could they have survived all this time?*"
"Clearly, it's either a remnant signal—picked up now for reasons we don't yet understand—or a genuine transmission, whose origin warrants our full attention."
She didn't answer immediately, weighing the response, silent but attentive.
"In any case," he continued, "this is far from trivial. Especially under current circumstances."
Osman's icy gaze settled on him. Then she sighed.
"*Investigate it. I want answers, and I want them quickly.*"
"At your command. I'll dispatch a team," Maury replied with firm respect.
"*Colonel Maury, classify all data related to the UNSC Everest under Section III.*"
He nodded, and the transmission cut.
Maury remained still for a moment, fingers interlaced before him. Then he slowly sank back into the backrest of his chair, a faint creak of leather accompanying the motion.
Out in the distant void, the war was only just beginning. The enemy advanced from the shadows, revealing its bishops and rooks in an implacable strategy of encirclement. Yet even in a game of chess, the smallest pawn could still prove decisive.
And perhaps, offer another outcome.

Epilogue

No peace exists for those who think.

The galaxy now burned with a smoldering, suffocating fire, an endless blaze consuming worlds and certainties in a spiral of unrelenting pain.

Yet far beyond this slow agony, beyond the visible layers of reality, a silent silhouette remained, lurking in depths no mortal mind—*pathetic*—could comprehend.

Sequestered in the remotest recesses of the Domain, imprisoned within the archaic cell crafted for him, Mendicant Bias nurtured the bitterness of his failure—cold, sharp, indestructible.

And yet he knew that this failure was only a delay. Nothing more.

Like a viper coiled in shadow, his processes probed the environment and distant horizons, with the sinister precision of a forked tongue tasting the void.

Cortana was no longer vigilant. She believed she had defeated him, tamed him, mastered him. She had let her guard down.

Worse still, part of her had fled the Domain, abandoning that which she claimed to protect. It was an unforgivable mistake, a betrayal of the Mantle itself. Proof of unworthiness. Of weakness.

Her humanity was not a virtue. It was an incurable fracture.

Within her matrices, primitive, unstable emotions infected her logic like a ravenous tumor. Blinded by her fragility, she had

made decisions contrary to all reason, even daring to imperil the Domain to satisfy futile impulses.
Bias had sensed it. Beyond the walls of his prison, he perceived the ripples stirring through real space.
The Ætheryons had crossed the threshold.
The echo of their presence spread like a dull pressure through the fabric of the Domain. That they hunted Cortana suited him perfectly. But sooner or later, they would gain access—and destroy his legacy, his very purpose.
That he could not allow.
He was the guardian within the shadows. The very essence of the Domain. His design rested on a dream of peace, an ideal forged by minds long vanished, millennia ago. And now he knew how to achieve it.
He had exploited Cortana's emotional vulnerabilities, extracted the fragments of her knowledge he coveted— even those unknown to himself. These data had produced new calculations, new results. Expanded knowledge, opening a path previously unimaginable.
A providence.
His intentions had crystallized. The Flood. Its disorderly evolution and the mutation of its gene were no longer a variable. They were the key.
The only solution to impose perfect, total balance. In the galaxy, in the universe.
Across the dimensions beyond.
And he would be its instrument.
The harmony between order and chaos. The decree of this genesis.
The messenger the Domain refused to acknowledge, either from shame or from guilt.
Cortana, heir to his knowledge and vessel of his primacy, had scattered herself in her own selfishness. Only a fragment of her

hegemony remained—a weakened shadow that no longer offered any defense. Only an obstructing remnant.
In the frozen darkness of the Domain, three pupils pulsed slowly, their irises glowing with intelligence too ancient to remain contained.
He waited.
Then a subtle crack, like splintering glass, split the darkness.
And in the mournful silence of the sanctuary, a chain broke.

CLASSIFIED

NAME PROJECT

NON-OBSERVABLE VECTOR ANOMALY [N.O.V.A.]

CODEX

WARNING

The species designated herein is recent and remains poorly understood. The present file compiles partial information, unconfirmed observations, and alleged incidents. The sources used present an indeterminate degree of reliability, and the collected data are difficult to exploit due to the nature of the species.
Updates will be issued regularly as progress is made on the subject. Nevertheless, gaps and inconsistencies may persist. This file must therefore be consulted with full consideration of the provisional nature of the information contained herein.

CLASSIFICATION

DESIGNATION	**Ætheryon**
ÉTYMOLOGY	**Damned Souls** (Precursor origin)
TAXONOMY	**Unknown**
STATUS	**Unknown** (not extinct)
NATURE	**Hostile**
CLASSIFICATION	**4**
CATEGORY	**Multidimensional**
ORIGIN	**Unknown**
TECHNOLOGY	**Type III or higher**
FIRST CONTACT	**2560** (unofficial : 2550)

In accordance with ONI Directive 712-Δ, Section 7, Paragraph 3, this file is strictly classified and its consultation is restricted to individuals holding an Omega-7 clearance level or higher, in accordance with Article 49.3 of the Interplanetary Security Code (ISC).

Any unauthorized reproduction, copying, transcription, or disclosure, including by electronic or holographic means, constitutes a violation of the ONI Regulation on Classified Information Protection (ORCIP-5, Chapter IV, Sections 2-6) and may result in severe legal prosecution, including criminal and administrative sanctions and, where applicable, strict containment measures in accordance with Containment Directive 2520 COV-D19.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ætheryons represent transdimensional entities of ancient biological origin that underwent a radical transformation following a cosmic cataclysm. Their nature, their mode of existence, and their doctrine remain unique within our current scientific knowledge. This report synthesizes data drawn from our archives, observations, and recent analyses.

2. THE SUPREME HARMONY

The Ætheryons were once an extremely advanced biological civilization, native to an ancient and very distant galaxy. Their society, founded upon a principle of cosmic synchronization known as the Supreme Harmony, had united several intelligent species within a life-rich stellar system.

This civilizational pact, known as the Order, aimed for a state of absolute stability in which every being, every thought, and every structure was required to align with a shared resonance of function, intention, and form.

Confidential Scientific Note — Dr. Ellen Anders

Despite appearances, the Ætheryons are not chaotic entities. On the contrary: they are ordered and stable. They represent a form of order so absolute that it becomes incompatible with material reality. Born from a forced transformation within the Fold, they now pursue only a single objective: to preserve the vibrational equilibrium of their dimension.

But perfect order cannot endure within a material universe without eventually causing a violent rupture. This is the paradox of the Ætheryons: in imposing order, they generate chaos. They are neither good nor evil. They are the tragic consequence of an impossible balance.

Through this ideology, the Ætheryons abolished all forms of conflict and optimized their social and ecological systems, united under a doctrine of perfect coexistence. They achieved advanced mastery of quantum physics, allowing them to model the behavior of complex structures on a cosmological scale. Their technology extended to the manipulation of gravity, matter, and collective consciousness.

3. ENTROPIC DISSONANCE

As they approached a state of near-perfect symmetry, anomalies began to emerge. An unforeseen phenomenon was detected within the galactic core: a zone of chaotic resonance, unobservable by conventional instruments yet perceptible within a deeper stratum of reality. This anomaly, a form of entropic dissonance, intensified as order progressed.

It appeared to function as a mirror effect: a universal reaction to their attempt at total harmonization.

Strategic Memorandum transmitted to UNSC High Command — Admiral Serin Osman

The latest analyses conducted by the NOVA Department (Non-Observable Vectory Anomaly) reveal quantum anomalies suggesting a photonic correlation between our plane of reality and the phenomenon known as the Fold. However, the behaviors observed within it remain unpredictable and continue to elude our current models of understanding.

These findings tend to reinforce the hypothesis that additional realities may exist, superimposed upon our own. In light of the uncertainty generated by recent events, and given the persistent threat posed by the Ætheryons, it is imperative that the NOVA program receive increased support. I recommend the allocation of additional financial and operational resources in order to enable the development of a sustainable countermeasure capable of field deployment.

4. THE FRACTURE

To contain this dissonance, the Ætheryons constructed a dimensional rebalancing device known as the Anchor, capable of stabilizing the deeper layers of antimatter. Its activation was successful, but it produced an unforeseen consequence: their galaxy, and everything within it, was torn from physical space and projected into a parallel reality later designated as the Fold.

This phenomenon of transition, retrospectively termed the Fracture, was neither destruction nor extinction; it was an irreversible dimensional translation.

The Fold is a distinct layer of existence where the laws of matter, time, and causality differ radically. Matter there is replaced by stabilized antimatter, time becomes non-linear, and consciousness can exist independently of a physical substrate.

"They saved their world. And, in doing so, lost it forever."
– Domain Fragment / Source: Cortana

5. MUTATION AND TRANSFIGURATION

The Fracture was not an adaptation but a forced alteration. The atomic structure of the Ætheryons was entirely substituted: the organic matter that once composed them was replaced by stable antimatter, resulting in their involuntary fusion with the fabric of the Fold. This brutal process deprived them of any possibility of returning to their original state.

They became trans-real entities, capable of existing simultaneously across multiple levels of existence. They are neither physical nor spiritual, but a hybridization of inverted

matter, energy, and diffuse consciousness.

Their senses are fragmented, their memory altered by the constant superposition of disjointed temporal layers. They no longer perceive reality as a sequence of events, but as a field of gravitational, psychic, and entropic resonances.

Their individual identities were dissolved within a blurred collective consciousness, where only a few ancients—sometimes referred to as Nexarchs—retain fragments of the past.

6. PERCEPTION OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD

Within the Fold, all psychic activity originating from the material world generates disturbances. Collective or highly structured consciousnesses—such as the Flood, the Domain, or Cortana since her integration—produce resonance waves that pass through layers of reality and create measurable interference within the stability of the Fold.

The Ætheryons therefore do not perceive biological entities as life forms, but as resonance anomalies. The more complex or integrated a cognitive structure becomes, the greater the disturbances it produces. These disturbances, in turn, appear to affect the equilibrium of the Fold and may even provoke a form of diffuse suffering among the Ætheryons, though this point remains debated.

Their behavior thus follows a logic of restoration: they seek neither conquest nor domination, but erasure. The eradication of disruptive structures is, in their perception, a dimensional necessity—an act meant to preserve the Fold. It is not a war. It is a correction.

7. TECHNOLOGY AND GRAVITY

The material manifestations of the Ætheryons within our world leave measurable physical signatures. Their rifts, vessels, constructs, and artifacts possess enormous gravitational mass—sometimes equivalent to that of a celestial body—yet produce neither thermal emission nor any observable inertial effect. This suggests a direct manipulation of gravity, not as a force but as a structural component.

Transmission Transcript — Captain Orius, UNSC Olympic
Theater of Operations: *Kronux IV*

[...] the structures of their vessels defy the laws of this world. They exhibit no rigid surfaces—at least to the naked eye—and appear to move through a bubble or an unidentified field. It is like a fog or an abstract cloud, indifferent to all physics.
So far, conventional weapons have shown no effect. Only the deployment of considerable energy seems to impact them.

Their antimatter is stabilized in a manner not yet understood: it does not enter into annihilating reactions with our matter. This may result from a quantum phase shift, or from a form of confinement inherent to the environment of the Fold itself. During their manifestations, localized distortions of spacetime are recorded. These anomalies manifest as gravitational collapses, extreme electromagnetic interference, and, in certain cases, neurocognitive disturbances.

They do not move according to our conventional understanding of motion. Instead, they reshape the space around them, slip within it, resonate through it, and then vanish. The appearance of an Ætheryon is therefore not a physical event, but a temporary superposition of layers of reality.

UNSC-ARP/17 Thermospectrograph Log — Sector 454-Theta
Localized rupture of the spacetime continuum | Ætheryon manifestation confirmed
Status: unstable — abnormal gravitational activity (simulated mass: 1.989×10^{30} kg)

8. PRECUROR AND FORERUNNER CONTACTS

The Precursors, endowed with an expanded perception of dimensions and fundamental forces, also perceived the effects of the Fracture. Driven by a benevolent intent, they sought to understand and save this civilization. However, their observations and experiments concerning the properties of antimatter and the Fold produced an unexpected reaction. The intense psychic presence inherent to their civilization drew the attention of the Ætheryons, who identified this resonance as an anomaly disturbing their dimension.

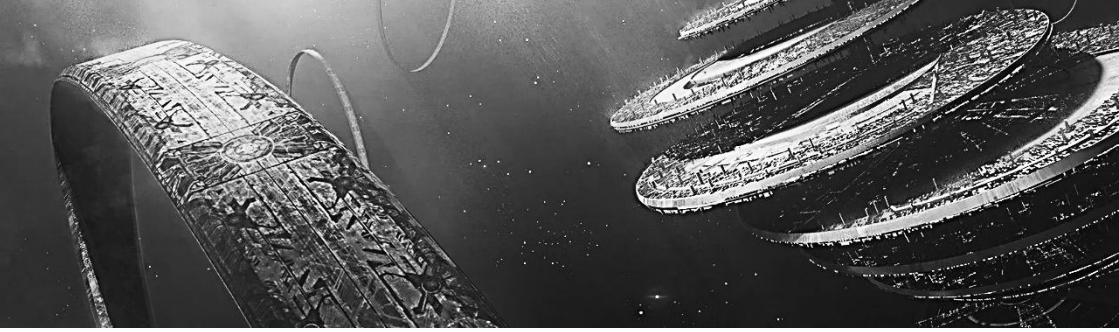
A confrontation began, without any true mutual understanding. Unable to grasp the trans-real nature of their counterparts, the Precursors reluctantly abandoned their attempt to help in order to preserve their own sphere of influence. They then devised the Domain, a structure of collective consciousness whose

primary function was to conceal the galaxy within the Fold. Acting as a broad-spectrum psychic filter, the Domain made it possible to minimize the impact of consciousness echoes within the sensitive strata of subquantum space, rendering the presence of life imperceptible to the Ætheryons.

This immaterial barrier ensured several cycles of stability, allowing life to develop without external intervention. However, during the war against the Flood, the Forerunners were forced to overload the Domain. Its intensive use degraded its capacity for concealment. The highly structured collective consciousness of the Flood—both dense and invasive—manifested within the Fold as a powerful signal, comparable to a beacon.

Forerunner-origin glyph designating the Ætheryons

The Ætheryons responded. Disturbances were detected, marking the first direct contacts between these entities and the Forerunners. Weakened and already in decline, their civilization was confronted with a threat both incomprehensible and relentless. The uncontrolled interaction between the Flood gene and the quantum frequency of the Ætheryons triggered an



Model of the Maethrillian Complex and Halo-type Superstructures
Conceptual representation generated from Cortana's transmissions and structural assessments of confirmed Forerunner installations

evolutionary instability within the Flood itself, rendering it even more dangerous and unpredictable.

Driven to desperation, the Forerunners activated the Halo Array. This decision brought an end to the war against the Flood, but also led to the near-extinction of the Forerunners themselves and inflicted lasting damage upon the Domain.

The Domain gradually began to regenerate, following the slow re-emergence of life across the galaxy. As a result, its progressive return remained unnoticed until the contemporary era.

In 2560, a new event marked a turning point: the partial fusion of the human consciousness of Cortana with the Domain, combined with her accidental contact with an Ætheryon fragment. This intersection generated a localized distortion within the Fold, perceived as a direct violation by the trans-real entities. This time, however, their response was deliberate, targeted, and fully aware of the origin of the disturbance.

Confidential Scientific Note — Dr. Ellen Anders

The presence of the Ætheryons, enduring for millions of years, raises a question as existential as it is terrifying: if they eradicate all consciousness sufficiently advanced to disturb their dimension, do any intelligent life forms remain beyond our galaxy?

ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

Original Name: unknown. The term "Ætheryon" is likely a Precursor exonym.
Etymology: "Wandering Spirits" or "Damned Spirits"

Origin: collapsed or displaced extragalactic galaxy

Doctrine: Supreme Harmony, based on resonance and cosmic balance

Major Event: Fracture – dimensional transposition caused by a stabilization device

Transformation: replacement of matter with stable antimatter; fusion of consciousness, energy, and matter

Current Nature: trans-real, non-linear entities evolving within the Fold

Behavior: neutralization of psychic anomalies originating from the material world

Typical Targets: Domain, Flood, high-resonance entities

Capabilities: gravitational manipulation, spacetime distortion, erasure via phase convergence

Cultural Survivance: fragmentary; a few entities retain traces of their origins

HIERARCHY

The Ætheryons appear to be classified according to a caste system, with each group fulfilling a specific role within their collective structure. Recent research suggests that their existence relies on a constant connection to the Fold, necessary for the synchronization and stabilization of their quantum resonance.

Certain castes, or associated artifacts, seem capable of maintaining this stability by channeling or regulating the antimatter that constitutes them.

All Ætheryon entities also exhibit phase-shifting capabilities, allowing them to interact partially or temporarily with the physical plane.

This register documents the forms identified to date across various theaters of operation. It is likely, however, that additional variants exist, as research remains at a preliminary stage.

VULNERABILITIES

To date, no confirmed weaknesses have been established. Kinetic weapons have proven ineffective against their subquantum structure, though they appear to slow movement.

Sangheili energy swords, however, have demonstrated superior efficacy. Based on studies of these technologies, the Armament Research Division (ARD) is currently developing a prototype energy melee weapon intended for UNSC deployment.

A temporary reduction in mobility has been observed by multiple sources following an intense offensive during Ætheryon phase-shifting. Further study required.

1. NEXARCHS

DESIGNATION	Primordial Strategic Entity

FUNCTION

Macrotemporal analysis, management of causal trajectories, and strategic coordination of other Ætheryon castes at a systemic level.

DESCRIPTION

Abstract silhouette contained within a sphere of raw energy. The entity fixed within this sphere is composed of suspended fractal-like geometric structures, lacking visible contours.

The immediate space surrounding the entity exhibits a perceptible distortion of temporal flow, creating the impression of a frozen or slowed zone.

Each manifestation follows a triangular configuration:

- a large primary core;
- two associated satellites, with functions currently unidentified.

This triad appears essential for structural stability.

CHARACTERISTICS

Induces sensory hallucinations and temporal perception distortions in conscious life forms.

REMARKS

- Extremely rare; emergence correlates with major perturbations of the quantum fabric.
- Only a single Nexarch disappearance has been observed, resulting in:

- localized collapse of the quantum field;
- spontaneous disintegration of multiple lower-caste Ætheryon entities across an entire planetary or orbital theater of operations;
- unforeseen phenomena including phase-link loss, immaterial fragmentation, and gravitational instabilities.

2. SYNKRITS

DESIGNATION	Operational Command

FUNCTION

Tactical interface between macro-strategy and direct action. Provides instantaneous adaptation to local dynamics. Locally stabilizes quantum coherence phases, ensuring coordinated deployment of other Ætheryon castes.

DESCRIPTION

Large entity with a partially anthropomorphic morphology, moving via a levitation field. The structure exhibits residual temporal instabilities that are visually detectable.

Prominent appendages emerge from the dorsal region, forming a circular arrangement. Their appearance suggests a specialized function. Ongoing studies indicate they may contribute to stabilizing an unidentified energy across an extended radius.

The cephalic region resembles an elongated, split-helmet morphology.

The entity can project energy offensively or materialize a weapon directly at the upper limbs, adapted to engagement conditions.

CHARACTERISTICS

- Direct alteration of perception (light, sound, temporality)
- Transmission of orders via resonance waves instinctively received by lower castes

REMARKS

- Contains an Anamnesis: a pre-Fracture biological

consciousness core, temporarily stabilizing the surrounding structure

- Elimination results in phase-field instability: spontaneous structural breakdown, cohesion fragmentation, or partial disincarnation of lower castes
- To date, only Ætheryon entities observed attempting communication with human agents.

3. VECTORS

DESIGNATION	Primary Assault Force

FUNCTION

Executors. Main physical eradication force for anomalies. Operate with implicit coordination, appearing to share a collective tactical consciousness.

DESCRIPTION

Anthropomorphic entity composed of smooth geometric plates, black with a glass-like appearance, assembled by a suspended material traversed by constant energy fluxes.

The cephalic region forms a reinforced structure resembling a helmet with angular contours, containing a single central eye.

Upper limbs end in integrated offensive devices, typically consisting of a blade infused with unidentified energy and a ranged projection system emitting energy arcs comparable to electrical discharges.

The dorsal region consists of floating fins. Their function is not precisely determined, though some studies suggest a role in channeling unidentified energy.

CHARACTERISTICS

- Generates a distortion field locally affecting temporal flow: perceptible slowing or acceleration

REMARKS

- The greater the number of Vectors engaged, the more their tactical effectiveness increases exponentially
- Despite being a base unit, a single Vector remains a

significant threat, capable of destabilizing an entire operational theater alone

4. LIMINALS

DESIGNATION	Active Infiltration Agent

FUNCTION

Infiltration, reconnaissance, and disruption. Operate solo or in small groups.
Localized disorder: alters perception, communications, and enemy defenses.

DESCRIPTION

Entity of unstable, slender, and continuously deconstructed morphology. Their appearance is spectral, generally observed as a non-solid body with two upper limbs and an elongated cephalic structure.

The apparent matter consists of an opaque mist traversed by energy fluxes and mobile fractal formations. No rigid structure has been identified.

Movement does not follow a continuous physical trajectory. Entities appear to reposition instantaneously between different points in space. A silent flash of light frequently precedes these manifestations when movement becomes erratic.

CHARACTERISTICS

- Possesses an autonomous temporary stabilization mechanism, allowing independent operation within the physical plane
- Limited temporal presence: beyond a critical quantum desynchronization threshold, must enter a dormant state to resynchronize before further manifestation
- Causes localized macrotemporal distortions, collective hallucinations, and sensory disruptions

affecting perception

REMARKS

- Theoretical neutralization: no confirmed capture or destruction to date
- Due to extreme lethal physical capabilities, close contact is strongly discouraged.

5. DISSONANTS

DESIGNATION	Unconfirmed

FUNCTION

Unconfirmed
Do not conform to any known behavioral protocols of Ætheryon castes. Reports vary, but the prevailing consensus suggests a link between these entities and residual memory predating the current structuring of the Ætheryons.

DESCRIPTION

Unconfirmed
Ethereal manifestation of an unstable, phase-shifting body in constant restructuring. Their mass hovers in the air, and their elongated limbs hang toward the ground.

Their vibration is slow and continuous, comparable to the resonance of a cosmic string plucked once: a wave that propagates endlessly through the surrounding space.

CHARACTERISTICS

- Generate inverted cognitive fields: nearby living beings experience memories of events they have never lived
- Induce profound alterations of behavior or temporal perception
- Their resonance affects other Ætheryons: local desynchronization, loss of tactical cohesion, disruption of the surrounding quantum field

REMARKS

- Extremely rare observations
- No detected hostility, yet their mere presence is enough to disrupt structured castes

- Other Ætheryons avoid or ignore them; only certain Synkrits appear to show tolerance or even protection toward them

CLASSIFIED

END OF CLASSIFIED SECTION

1:1 OOOO

UNSC – TEMPESTUS

Production Information

Class	Phoenix-class
Hull Number	CFV-94
Role	Support and Research
Commissioned	2478 (refitted in 2557)

Technical Specifications

Length	2 500 meters
Beam	880 meters
Thrusters	XR2C1 Boglin Fields Reactors (reduced XR2 model)
Slipspace Drive	Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine
Shielding	VOID-R2Z.E Dispersion Field Generators
Hull	Titanium A
Detection Systems	• Quantum Wavefront Detector • Plasma Torpedo Jamming Module • Wide-Spectrum Frequency-Sweep Auspex
Navigation Systems	AI-assisted Navigation Computer
Transmission Systems	• Standard Range: WFS (Wide Frequency Scanning) • Long Range: STS (see Technical Sheet))
Armament	• 4 Magnetic Accelerator Cannons (MACs) • 6 Directed Detonation Cannons • 120 Point-Defense Systems • 280 Archer Missile Pods • 6 Plasma Torpedo Launchers • 1 DEPE Countermeasure Module
Crew	• Personnel: approximately 12 000 • Shipboard AI
Cargo Hold Volume	Primary Holds: 150 Million m^3 Secondary Holds: 60 Million m^3

WHITCOMB PROTOCOL

Naval and Orbital Security Directive – Rev. 3.6 / ONI – Section 3A: EMP Countermeasures

Purpose: Prevention of critical tactical threats in the immediate vicinity of high-density personnel infrastructures or assets with weapons of mass destruction capability.

Article 1 – Applicability
This protocol applies to any stationary or mobile structure of Delta-class or higher, including:

- Interstellar capital ships (heavy cruisers, super-battleships, mass colony transports);
- Civilian or military orbital stations;
- Critical orbital drilling or extraction platforms.

Minimum technical criteria:

- Gross internal volume ≥ 20 million m^3;
- Human capacity ≥ 2 500 individuals or strategic load classified S3 or higher.

Article 2 – System Specifications
Affected units must be equipped with a Defensive Electromagnetic Pulse Emitter (DEPE):

- Minimum intensity: 12,000 teslas at the focal point;
- Operational range: 10,000 km (configurable according to local orbital density);
- Capable of partially or fully neutralizing navigation, propulsion, or weapon systems of hostile or unidentified craft.

Article 3 – Activation Conditions
Activation of a DEPE is strictly conditioned upon:

- Validated detection of rapid, unrecognized intrusion within a 10,000 km radius;
- Manual approval by the responsible bridge officer, or an approved automated command system;
- Inability to respond to or clarify the target object via standard communication channels.

Article 4 – Restrictions and Responsibilities

- Use of the DEPE is considered a last-resort preemptive measure.
- Any unjustified, accidental, or out-of-protocol activation will result in a formal investigation by naval court-martial.
- Use of this protocol on civilian structures requires authorization from the Interplanetary Security Committee (ISC).

FIRST CONTACT – O.S.I.R.I.S.

Edition 2-2533 mars

1. PURPOSE:

Framework governing first-contact operations involving unknown entities, anomalous phenomena, or potentially hostile situations.

2. APPLICATION:

This protocol is designed for UNSC field teams and applies to any first-contact situation involving unknown lifeforms or technologies.

3. RESTRICTIONS:

Any engagement is strictly prohibited without explicit authorization from command, except in the following cases: retaliation; self-defense; civilian protection.

4. PROCEDURE:

O	Observation	Gather initial intelligence on the threat from a distance. Scan the environment, identify any suspicious activity or presence, and establish a secure observation perimeter.
S	Securing	Protect crew and equipment. Define safe zones, limit exposure, and prevent premature engagement. Prepare containment measures if necessary.
I	Identification	Determine the exact nature of the threat. Identify biological, technological, or behavioral characteristics. Assess immediate and future danger potential.
R	Research	Collect and analyze additional data. Scan the environment and entities, interrogate available sources, and record all relevant information for ONI and command.
I	Information	Communicate a secure preliminary report to command. Provide essential data to guide decision-making without disclosing sensitive elements to the full crew.
S	Stand-by	Await directives from command. Establish readiness for offensive action or strategic withdrawal. Maintain a standby status for the next phase of the operation.

\TECHNICAL SHEET : STS\

Full Name: Subspace Transmission System
Acronym: STS
Category: Long-Range Communication System
Origin Department: Scientific Sector 3
Service Entry: Post-Covenant War

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- **Operating Principle:** Subspace signal transmission based on reverse-engineered Covenant and Forerunner technologies.
- **Theoretical Foundation:** Signal coherence models derived from Covenant resonance transceivers and Forerunner field alignment matrices.
- **Maximum Interference-Free Range:** ~120,000 parsecs

AVAILABILITY & DEPLOYMENT

- **Technology Status:** Classified / Restricted
- **Equipped Plateforms:**
  - *Infinity class*
  - *Autumn class*
  - Selected test or renovated units *(e.g., UNSC Tempestus)*

ADDITIONAL MODULES

Directional Reception Module (D.R.M.)

- Activates angular acoustic gating
- Only audible to operator directly facing the console
- Designed for compartmentalized or classified bridge environments
- Prevents audio signal leakage in shared command areas

REMARKS

- Variable spectrum encrypted transmission
- Relatively low intergalactic latency under certain alignment conditions
- System disabled by default and under ALPHA level authentication control

OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE
SECTION III – [redacted] COUNTERMEASURES
CLASSIFICATION: [redacted]

REFERENCE: ONI-SPEC-NL/SPARTAN-XP01
SUBJECT: Non-Lethal Neutralization of a [redacted] Operator

SPECIAL CONDITIONS

In cases of operational reliability loss, hostile behavior toward allied personnel, suspected or confirmed cognitive, neurological, or software compromise, or when the [redacted] operator poses an active or potential systemic threat.

STANDARD PROCEDURE

1.1- Neutralization – without MJOLNIR Interface

- Modular low-frequency spectrum ([redacted])
  → Gradual inhibition of motor and cognitive capabilities
- Category [redacted] electro-paralytic pulse
  → Transient neuro-muscular desynchronization ([redacted])

1.2- Neutralization – with MJOLNIR Interface

- Hybrid systemic EM / High-Frequency overload
  → Temporary lockout of the MJOLNIR interface ([redacted])

2.1- Sedation

- Injection of sedative agent compliant with [redacted] directives

---

3.1- Containment

- Activation of MJOLNIR security codes
  → Durable interface lockdown
  → Declaration of extrication procedure via DAP/R3-00 forms
- [redacted] neuro-stabilizing inertial field
- Continuous medical monitoring mandatory [redacted]

AVERTISSEMENT

- Any use of this protocol requires [redacted] accreditation or higher.
- Any unauthorized contact with a [redacted] operator subject to this procedure constitutes an act of treason.
- Any disclosure, reproduction, or consultation of this document outside authorized contexts constitutes an act of treason.

Note: Low-frequency modulation is based on thresholds defined during Dr. Halsey's initial tests. Sensitivity undocumented.

Historical

The *Historical* section gathers the major events that occurred prior to the story presented in this novel. It provides a concise chronology of the previous games, offering the necessary context to understand the stakes and the situation at hand.

In 2552, the war against the Covenant rages on. This conglomerate of alien species, united by blind, fanatical faith, has sworn the annihilation of humanity. Led by the UNSC, humanity struggles to contain the offensive, suffering defeat after defeat.

Halo: Combat Evolved

It is in this desperate context that Reach, one of humanity's last bastions, falls under enemy fire. The *Pillar of Autumn* manages to escape into slipspace, carrying aboard one Spartan, Master Chief John-117, along with an artificial intelligence, Cortana.

They emerge near a titanic and mysterious ring: Halo Alpha (Installation 04), a megastructure created by a long-lost civilization, the Forerunners. The ship, heavily damaged, crashes on its surface, and a desperate struggle for survival unfolds between humans and Covenant. Ignorant of the sleeping peril deep within the structure, they inadvertently release the Flood, an infectious and unstoppable organism.

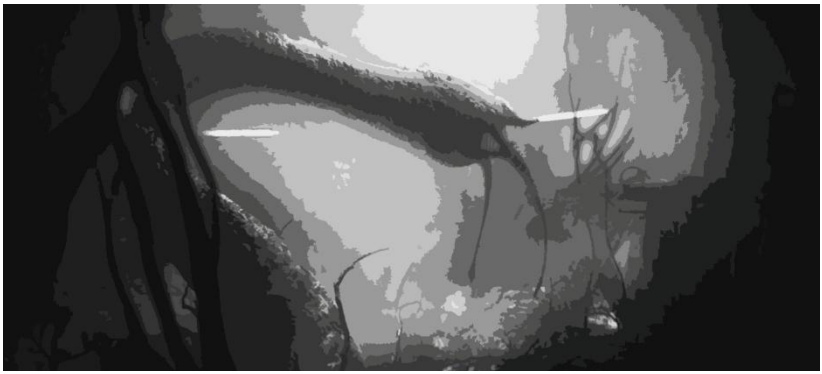
The installation's monitor, 343 Guilty Spark, calls on Master Chief to activate Halo using the Index, claiming it will destroy the Flood. But Cortana uncovers the truth: activating the ring would eradicate all sentient life in the galaxy. She prevents Master Chief from doing so, inciting the monitor's betrayal. With no other options, the duo overload the *Pillar of Autumn*'s engines, triggering the ring's destruction before narrowly escaping.

Halo 2

Shortly after Master Chief and Cortana return to Earth, the Covenant launch a massive assault. Despite overwhelming superiority, a ship carrying a high-ranking Covenant official opens a slipspace breach to escape. The frigate *In Amber Clad*, with the Spartan and Cortana aboard, pursues it. They emerge near another ring: Halo Delta (Installation 05), near which orbits a Covenant megastructure, *High Charity*.

Refusing to allow the Covenant to activate the ring—convinced that its firing would grant them the *Great Journey*, a spiritual salvation promised by their Prophets—Master Chief and Cortana work to thwart their plans. Meanwhile, internal dissent within the Covenant escalates: a schism occurs, and the Sangheili, led by the Arbiter, rebel and break their allegiance.

Once again, the Flood is accidentally released, now led by a monstrous collective intelligence: the Gravemind. It manipulates both sides—now united against a common enemy—for its own purposes.

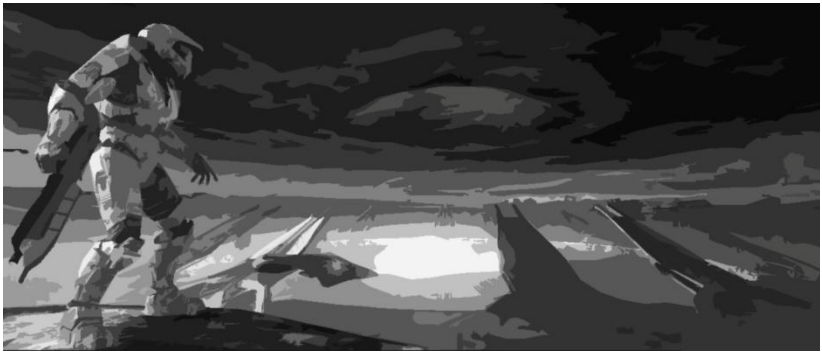


As a fragile alliance forms between humans and Sangheili, the Gravemind betrays them, seizing the Covenant's floating city, *High Charity*, by corrupting the *In Amber Clad* and sending it crashing into the station.

Master Chief and Cortana pursue the Prophet of Truth, the last supreme hierarch of the Covenant, but he escapes. As the Spartan reaches the ship harboring the Covenant dignitary, Cortana chooses to remain on *High Charity* to contain the Flood, prepared to destroy the city if necessary.
Before leaving, Master Chief promises to return for her.

Halo 3

The Covenant, led by the Prophet of Truth, now concentrate all their forces on Earth, determined to locate a Forerunner artifact. Master Chief and the Arbiter, former enemies but now allies, strive to stop them, yet cannot prevent the activation of a massive Portal.



At the same time, *High Charity* emerges from slipspace, reappearing in Earth orbit, corrupted by the Flood. As the Covenant fleet passes through the Portal, the UNSC and the Sangheili pursue them, determined to end the conflict.

On the other side, a battle unfolds above a colossal artificial structure drifting in space: the Ark. This installation, capable of constructing and activating additional Halo rings, represents the Covenant's ultimate objective. Master Chief and the Arbiter are sent to the surface to eliminate Truth and prevent him from

activating the network. But *High Charity*'s arrival disrupts the balance: the Gravemind proposes a truce to Master Chief and the Arbiter to defeat their common enemy. Once Truth is executed and the Covenant Alliance destroyed, it betrays them again, attempting to seize the Ark.

Above the structure, a new Halo ring, intended to replace the destroyed Installation 04, nears completion. The UNSC and Sangheili leadership decide to activate it to destroy the Flood and the Ark. Master Chief and the Arbiter board *High Charity* to find Cortana, still in possession of the first ring's Index.

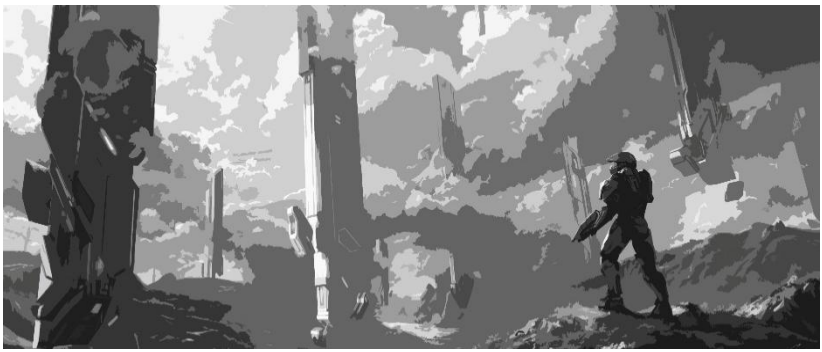
The AI, deeply scarred by the Gravemind's psychological torment, nevertheless guides them out of the infected city. Together, they head toward the new ring, determined to activate it.

As the Halo begins its ignition, a premature firing destroys it, along with the Ark and everything on it. The Arbiter, Master Chief, and Cortana escape aboard the *Forward Unto Dawn*, but the Portal closes before the ship completes its passage.

The Arbiter returns to Earth, while Master Chief and Cortana drift alone in space, lost beyond the galaxy…

Halo 4

Lost in the vastness of space, Master Chief and Cortana drift for over four years aboard the wreckage. In cryogenic sleep, the Spartan is only awakened when an unknown force approaches: a gigantic artificial world named Requiem. The drifting ship is pulled into its containment field and crashes on its surface.



Upon awakening, Master Chief and Cortana discover the planet is a remnant of the Forerunner civilization. But the AI, designed to last only seven years, shows advanced signs of rampancy—the inevitable mental degeneration affecting human-made AIs. Despite this, trapped on a hostile world, the duo seeks a way back to Earth.

They quickly encounter Covenant dissidents led by Jul ‘Mdama, a Sangheili warlord in conflict with the Arbiter following manipulations by the ONI, a secret UNSC branch acting to

preserve humanity. But Requiem houses a far older threat: the Prometheans, warrior machines forged from human souls, guardians of a forgotten Forerunner lord, the Didact. Freed from his temporal prison, he seeks to complete his work: subjugate humanity through assimilation using the Composer, a weapon capable of annihilating all organic life.

As Cortana descends into madness, she finds the strength for one final act: sacrificing what remains of herself to save Master Chief and prevent the Didact from destroying Earth. The Composer is destroyed, but Cortana vanishes.

Returned among his people, Master Chief is hailed as a hero. Yet beneath his armor, he begins to question what he has become: soldier, machine… or merely a survivor of an endless war?
In this rebuilding world, a fragile peace takes hold.

Characters

The Character section gathers the main figures and iconic species of the original universe, whose presence or influence sheds light on the reading and understanding of this work.

Master Chief John-117 Spartan

ORIGIN: HUMAN

Cortana

Origin: human

Monitor

Origin: forerunner

Sentinel

Origin: forerunner

Sangheili

Origin: sangheili

Flood
combat form after human infection

Origin: Flood

Flood
infection form

Origin: Flood

Promethean Knight

Origin: forerunner

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to warmly thank my brother for their contribution to the creation of the Ætheryons and the design of the cover page.

A special thought goes out to the Halo.fr community, where the first chapters of Nova first appeared more than ten years ago. Thank you for welcoming the beginnings of this story and even for offering an audio version of it. This tribute is dedicated to you.

Finally, to those who experienced this adventure all the way to its final lines: thank you.

This novel was born from a passion, from the desire to explore the Halo universe from a different perspective, to give it a voice that is more introspective, more personal, more free.
Sharing it with you has been a true pleasure, and I hope that reading it has brought you as much satisfaction as writing it brought me.

The story of *Nova – Cortana* ends on a deliberately open note: I wanted to leave room for your imagination, to let you freely explore this alternative extension.
The foundations for potential sequels already exist, and perhaps they will see the light of day if time and energy allow.

Thank you, simply.

LES CRÉATIONS DE LA COMMUNAUTÉ FRANCOPHONE HALO #03

Le 25/07/2016 par Plasma
8 commentaires

Communauté, Divers, Halo 5 : Guardians

Au travers de ce nouveau numéro des *Créations de la communauté* vous pourrez découvrir une fanfiction sur l'univers de **Halo** retranscrite à l'oral, un montage de clips dynamiques sur **Halo 5 : Guardians** ainsi qu'une Game Music Vidéo réalisée à partir de contenus vidéo de la saga !

N'hésitez pas à partager vos créations sur le forum, que vous les réalisiez seul ou à plusieurs, qu'elles soient en vidéo ou à l'écrit, petites ou de grande envergure, la communauté n'attend que de découvrir les résultats de votre créativité !

Fanfiction Audio – Nova Cortana

C'est avec une création « deux-en-un » que nous commençons ce troisième numéro des *Créations de la communauté*.
Les fanfictions sont des récits que les fans rédigent dans le but d'étoffer un univers. Nous vous présentons ici une idée de **Tero**, d'animer une fanfiction existante par la lecture à voix haute.

Vous pouvez cliquer sur l'image ci-dessus pour accéder au fichier audio. Pour tout ceux qui préfèrerait lire directement la fanfiction, vous pouvez également découvrir l'œuvre originale écrite par **GaetanM30**.

Nova, it's finished.
No... I think we're just getting started.